

The Philosopher's Virtue: *Phaedo* 68c–69c  
Draft for AGARP 1/11/19

Serena Lai

---

This paper argues for a radical interpretation of the relationship between virtue and wisdom using the Exchange Passage in the *Phaedo* (69a5–c2). The Exchange Passage consists of three metaphors, which I will refer to as the Coin Metaphor (69a5–b6), the Shadow-Painting Metaphor (69b6–9), and the Purification Metaphor (69b9–c2). In contrast with interpretations which attempt to make sense of the passage in isolation from the immediate context in which it occurs, my interpretation relies on the fact that the Exchange Passage is offered as an answer to a question: why is the philosopher more virtuous than the non-philosopher? I will argue that the philosopher alone recognizes that a seeker of virtue becomes truly virtuous only by seeking wisdom. Surprisingly, one cannot become truly virtuous by aiming at virtue directly.

Section 1 examines Socrates' claim that courage (and, by extension, every virtue) belongs especially to philosophers (68c5–6) to illustrate that the text does not so much explain why it is that the philosopher is most virtuous but rather why the non-philosopher errs with respect to virtue. I propose two possible understandings of the nature of the error, which I refer to as the Source of Being Explanation and the Source of Value Explanation. Section 2 introduces the Exchange Passage as Socrates' answer to what makes the philosopher paradigmatically virtuous. Only once we understand this answer can we identify the precise nature of the non-philosopher's error. Sections 3–5 examine each metaphor in turn to extract lessons about the relationship between virtue and wisdom. All the metaphors engage in their own ways with the themes of cause, value, reality, and deception. Interpreting the metaphors in light of each other, I show that Socrates has in mind both the Source of Being Explanation and the Source of Value Explanation for why the non-philosopher errs. Sections 6 and 7 conclude the paper by flagging problems in the account to develop in the future.

## 1 No Courage through Fear

The first major section of the *Phaedo* is Socrates' Defense (63e6–69e4), so named in direct contrast with Socrates' *Apology* defense. The *Phaedo* defense is Socrates' *apologia* to his fellow philosophers for why the true philosopher should be willing and ready to die. It concludes with an examination of ordinary notions of virtue. He claims, "if you are willing to reflect on the courage and moderation of other people, you will find them strange (*atopon*) (68d4)."

*The No Courage through Fear Argument (NCTF):*

P1: Ordinary people are courageous through fear (68d12–13).

P2: But it is illogical (*alogon*) that a person should be courageous through fear and through cowardice (68d13–14).

C: Courage belongs especially to philosophers (68c5–6).

'Philosopher' in this context refers to those who despise the body (64e) and spend their lives loving wisdom; an ordinary person is a non-philosopher, or any person who does not fit this description. Ordinary people act courageously because they have a prevailing fear of death (68d). When they do face up to some danger in the world, it is because they are actively avoiding death. Fleeing death causes them to run towards a competing option. The implication is that this avoidance strategy is what gives their action the appearance of virtue. It is only because I fear dishonor more than I fear death that I choose to defend Patroclus' body against the Trojans. It is only because I wish to avoid a hangover that I forgo drinking one more glass of wine tonight. So, the ordinary person does the virtuous act, which gives her the appearance of being virtuous.<sup>1</sup> But doing the virtuous act alone is not enough to qualify as proper virtue, for an agent must have the

---

<sup>1</sup> I will treat courage and temperance as case studies that generalize to an account of all the virtues. Some have noted correctly that a weaker claim is made for courage than for temperance, but to my knowledge Beere is the only scholar to distinguish between Socrates' treatment of courage and his treatment of temperance.

right motivation or source. Rowe calls the the non-philosopher's virtue an "unconscious hedonism."<sup>2</sup>

What, exactly, explains the illogicality of the ordinary person who performs the virtuous action from the wrong source? I will consider two possibilities. Call them the Source of Being Explanation and the Source of Value Explanation. The first misidentifies the cause of a virtue and the second misidentifies the source of the value of a virtue.

Explanation 1 (Source of Being) is the most straightforward: cowardice can't cause courage and immoderation can't cause moderation. It's strange to think that a virtue could be grounded in the metaphysical sense in what gives rise to it. This would result in something like a causal source via opposites.<sup>3</sup> It might be true that fear in an agent is necessary for her manifestation of courage, or that desire is necessary for an agent to have the opportunity to be temperate. But to have a notion of a virtue that identifies its necessary conditions as its causal source is confused and illogical. Evidence that this misidentification is on Socrates' mind occurs later in the text during the intellectual autobiography, when he chastises the materialists for confusing a necessary condition with a proper cause. Further evidence for this interpretation is that the grammar in NCTF uses the dative construction often used in the early dialogues' 'what is X?' question. So it's plausible that in this passage Socrates is anticipating causes in that sense.

Explanation 2 (Source of Value) locates the illogicality in the lack of an immutable standard of value, where that standard is what determines whether an action is virtuous or not. Without an immutable standard, measurements occur by whatever standards are contingently at hand. Measured by one standard, x is F. At the same time, measured by another standard, x is not F. But this is a bad result. Consider a value-neutral case. Is Naya the Shedd Aquarium beluga long or short? Aurek swims to her side and I judge that Naya is short, then Bella swims to join them and I

---

<sup>2</sup> Rowe 149. To use the language of the *Protagoras*, the many think of themselves as employing some other criteria of choice like the good or noble but in reality they measure everything by the single yardstick of what will maximize pleasure and minimize pain. So on Rowe's account the many are unwittingly choosing the non-good and non-noble.

<sup>3</sup> As suggested by Petraki 12.

judge that Naya is long. The absurdity is that Naya is both short and long at the same time. This absurdity indicates that Aurek and Bella are poor measures, despite the fact that both being belugas, they are the same as Naya in kind and so ought to be appropriate measures. To settle the matter requires an immutable standard: Naya is 12'3". The power of appealing to an immutable standard lies not only in the fact that we can determine her length compared with Aurek's and Bella's (14' and 10'6", respectively) but also in the fact that she is commensurable with any other object whose length is measurable in feet and inches.<sup>4</sup> Armed with this standard of measurement, I can intelligibly answer the questions of whether Bella is a large mammal, whether she is a large white thing, or whether she is a large object in the cosmos, etc. I am no longer restricted to comparisons with objects that are the same in kind.

By analogy with the value-neutral case, the absurdity of the lack of an immutable standard of value is that any action an agent chooses risks being both virtuous and not virtuous at the same time.<sup>5</sup> One option, defending Patroclus' body, is courageous when I reflect on shame as the competing option, but cowardly when I reflect on defending the polis' freedom as another competing option. So the result is that the virtue of an action depends on the comparison with options available to an agent at any given time. An action possesses a property not eternally or stably but rather according to context and proximity, by being the best option compared with others that are immediately available in a contingent circumstance.

Evidence for this reading is the disdain shown in Socrates' Defense for the impediments of the body (66d) and the prominent language of confusion, distraction, and impediment. Coupled with the claim that fear of death is an indication of excessive love of the body, it's plausible to surmise that a non-philosopher is beholden to her immediate desires, fears, and illusions which present competing and often contradictory standards to measure the value of a given choice.

---

<sup>4</sup> I've picked out immutability as the relevant feature for a measure. Note that I use 'immutable' instead of 'universal' because immutability is what allows for universality. Aristotle uses the rotation of the heavens as the measure for time because it is immutable with respect to generation/corruption and temporality. It is this immutability that makes it universal.

<sup>5</sup> See Petraki, Bobonich, Bostock, Gallop.

In the next section of the text, Socrates jettisons this notion of virtue in favor of one that is not internally inconsistent. Unfortunately, at this point in the text he does not explain what it is about philosophers that makes them more virtuous than non-philosophers and merely criticizes non-philosophers for going awry in one of these two ways. Somehow, philosophers are not courageous through fear or cowardice, so through what, exactly, are they courageous? As active readers, our temptation to supply the missing explanation is natural: if it's *alogs* for the cause of courage to be fear or cowardice, then it must be the case that

P3: Courage causes courage.

If P3 were an implied premise, then NCTF would be a neat foreshadowing of later passages in the *Phaedo* which hypothesize that only X causes X. We need only supply an additional P4: “Philosophers alone are courageous through courage,” and the argument goes through.

But this is not what happens. Though 'C causes C' might be deliberately implied, it is never stated. Why it isn't is an open question. Note that Socrates has already mentioned the forms at 65d, so it wouldn't be too difficult for him to invoke them again to establish that only Courage causes courage. One possibility is that he isn't responding to a metaphysical question but rather one about how to act well. He's just indicating that the philosopher gets something right and the non-philosopher gets something wrong with respect to virtue.

My answer is that he doesn't invoke the forms because P3 isn't true. And indeed, instead of relying on P3 as a premise in NCTF, Socrates offers a series of metaphors which functions as an explanation for how to properly attain virtue as the philosopher does, thereby filling in the explanatory gap for why the ordinary person is not properly virtuous but the philosopher is.

## 2 The Exchange Passage (69a6–c2)

The Exchange Passage (TEP) explains what ordinary people get wrong and what philosophers get right by distinguishing the proper exchange from an improper exchange in the context of buying and selling. Perplexingly, the passage isn't so much a straightforward

explanation as it is a series of three metaphors. I will refer to them as the Coin Metaphor (69a5–b6), the Shadow-Painting Metaphor (69b6–9), and the Purification Metaphor (69b9–c2). Though I take it that each metaphor is meant to illuminate the others, I will treat the Coin Metaphor as the governing metaphor and interpret the Shadow-Painting and Purification Metaphors in light of it.

Dear Simmias, I fear that this isn't the proper exchange with a view to virtue: exchanging pleasures for pleasures and pains for pains and fears for fears, exchanging the greater for the lesser like coins. Instead, the true coin, for which all of these things should be exchanged, is wisdom. When all these things are bought and sold for wisdom and with wisdom, then truly is there courage, and temperance, and justice, and in short, true virtue with wisdom, whether pleasures and fears and other such things are included or discounted. But when all these things are exchanged for each other separately from wisdom, this sort of virtue is a kind of shadow-painting and it is truly slavish and is not sound or true. But truthfully, temperance and justice and courage is a sort of purging of all such things and this wisdom is a kind of purgative.<sup>6</sup>

*ὦ μακάριε Σιμμία, μὴ γὰρ οὐχ αὕτη ἢ ἡ ὀρθὴ πρὸς ἀρετὴν ἀλλαγὴ, ἡδονὰς πρὸς ἡδονὰς καὶ λύπας πρὸς λύπας καὶ φόβον πρὸς φόβον καταλλάττεσθαι, καὶ μείζω πρὸς ἐλάττω ὡσπερ νομίσματα, ἀλλ' ἢ ἐκείνο μόνον τὸ νόμισμα ὀρθόν, ἀντὶ οὗ δεῖ πάντα ταῦτα καταλλάττεσθαι, φρόνησις, καὶ τούτου μὲν πάντα καὶ μετὰ τούτου ὠνούμενά τε καὶ πιπρασκόμενα τῷ ὄντι ἢ καὶ ἀνδρεία καὶ σωφροσύνη καὶ δικαιοσύνη καὶ συλλήβδην ἀληθῆς ἀρετῆς, [ἢ] μετὰ φρονήσεως, καὶ προσγιγνομένων καὶ ἀπογιγνομένων καὶ ἡδονῶν καὶ φόβων καὶ τῶν ἄλλων πάντων τῶν τοιούτων· χωριζόμενα δὲ φρονήσεως [καὶ] ἀλλαπτόμενα ἀντὶ ἀλλήλων μὴ σκιαγραφία τις ἢ ἡ τοιαύτη ἀρετὴ καὶ τῷ ὄντι ἀνδραποδώδης τε καὶ οὐδὲν ὑγιὲς οὐδ' ἀληθὲς ἔχει, τὸ δ' ἀληθὲς τῷ ὄντι ἢ κάθαρσις τις τῶν τοιούτων πάντων καὶ ἡ σωφροσύνη καὶ ἡ δικαιοσύνη καὶ [ἢ] ἀνδρεία, καὶ αὕτη ἢ φρόνησις μὴ καθαρός τις ἢ.*

Readers are divided on how to interpret virtually every detail of the passage. Instead of cataloguing every interpretative debate, I will interpret the passage with an eye towards its explanatory function in the text. What is the philosopher getting right? And what is the non-philosopher getting wrong?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Translation my own. For a list of translations consulted, see bibliography.

An immediate advantage of this approach is that it eliminates a prominent debate: is the end game of the proper exchange true virtue or is it wisdom? Critics point to the tension between *e orthe pro areten allage* in a6 and the description of *phronesis* as the true coin, *anti hou dei panta tauta katallattesthai*. Situating the passage in its proper context—as an answer to why the philosopher is most virtuous—obviates the concern motivating the debate. For the purposes of answering what the philosopher is getting right, Socrates' concern is true virtue and how to attain it. But in the context of the answer itself, which describes the process of attaining true virtue, wisdom is the goal of the exchange. Commentators need not puzzle over whether one is subordinate to or instrumental for the sake of the other.

### 3 The Coin Metaphor (69a5–b6)

From NCTF in the previous section, we already knew that the ordinary person's method of trading pleasures for pleasures, pains for pains, and fears for fears was faulty. The real upshot of the Coin Metaphor is its introduction of a new option, the proper exchange, which explains what it is we ought to do instead. The proper exchange is to trade all pleasures, pains, and fears (henceforth PPF) for wisdom, the "true coin." This contrast between one exchange which disregards wisdom and another exchange that includes it will help us to understand what exactly is being advised. But before delving into the role of wisdom to explain how these exchanges differ, it's important to examine the purpose of the economic language in the first place.

This metaphor in particular has caused considerable consternation. Commentators disparage the analogy drawn between wisdom and coinage on the grounds that wisdom (1) is not diminished when spent and (2) it is not a competitive good.<sup>8</sup> In light of these difficulties, the extent to which the metaphor is taken literally varies. On one end of the spectrum, Burnet attributes the economic language to a scholium and excises all mention of the Coin Metaphor

---

<sup>8</sup> Archer-Hind, Bluck, Halper, Williamson, et al.

completely.<sup>9</sup> On the other end, Dorter embraces the metaphor and gives a literal reading. Most commentators fall somewhere in between by tracking the metaphor only as far as it agrees with established conceptions of Socratic/Platonic philosophy. Any leftover tensions they dismiss as disanalogous, an unfortunate inevitability of any metaphor's imperfect mapping. Though I will disagree with Dorter's interpretation, I find the literal approach the most productive.

My interpretation circumvents the problematic aspects of the disanalogy by highlighting three features of currency. The first is its social sanction. The word for 'coin' in the passage is *nomisma*. LSJ defines *nomisma* as "anything sanctioned by current or established usage," often but not necessarily denoting coinage. The use of *nomisma* is meant to convey the arbitrariness of the *hoi polloi*'s social sanction. For example, I take it that our contemporary society's bestowal of value upon cryptocurrency is a contingent fact. Socrates is alerting us to the flexibility of what is or is not valued at a given point in time. So the prominence of *phronesis* as *monon to nomisma orthon* in contrast with the *nomismata*-like exchange of PPFs emphasizes an arbitrary sanction with a non-arbitrary one. Morgan rightly observes that the argument's chief concern is to present a value system that competes with popular notions of what is valuable.<sup>10</sup> This should bring to mind the Source of Value Explanation from Section 1.

Following on this social dimension, the second relevant feature of currency is that it represents value. As a representation, a coin is a concrete placeholder for an abstract variable, like a dollar amount, that is convertible into another item via an exchange.<sup>11</sup> This feature is what lends the coin itself both intrinsic and instrumental value—intrinsic because the coin is the physical representation of an abstract value, instrumental because in virtue of its representational power I can use the coin to acquire other things. While some, perhaps coin collectors, do want coins for their own sake, for the most part coins are valuable because they afford the possessor purchasing

---

<sup>9</sup> Note that no one has followed him since.

<sup>10</sup> Morgan 31.

<sup>11</sup> Weiss 61 comes close to recognizing this feature but she mistakes it for a distinction between intrinsic value and higher intrinsic value.



---

power. My quarter represents twenty-five U.S. cents which I can convert into a gumball. Contrast the purchasing power of the quarter with my old iPhone SE. It might be valuable for the right buyer (perhaps someone in immediate need of a phone or someone whose small hands preclude comfortable usage of a newer, larger iPhone) but it will not bear the universal value that money in the form of currency does. I could not, for instance, bring the iPhone to the grocery store to exchange it for a month's worth of groceries.

The third feature of currency is that monetary exchanges which give up currency to receive an object concretize this abstract value. That's what it means to spend money: a buyer cashes in purchasing power to receive an object, service, or good. This feature highlights an important fact about the nature of exchange—a buyer deems an item worthy of exchange upon making the transaction. “Exchanging the greater for the lesser” indicates there is purposive and rational calculation of interest involved on the part of the buyer. To put it crudely, I as a rational agent will concretize an abstract value only if this concrete form is more valuable to me than cashing in on some other concrete form. I pay a laundry service \$15 because having my laundry washed and folded by someone else right now is more valuable to me than \$15 in abstract spending power is. I might have to forgo dinner that night as a result, but so be it.

To combine features 1, 2, and 3, coins are socially sanctioned representations of abstract value which function as purchasing power in exchange for some concrete good. So what would it mean for Socrates to describe wisdom as the ‘true coin?’ The implication is that (1) wisdom's value transcends social sanction, (2) it doesn't merely represent value; it *is* value, and so it follows that (3) wisdom is not something you would exchange to receive some other object in a rational exchange, since no other object could possibly be greater than wisdom in value. Wisdom is, to use Weiss' language, pursued but not spent.<sup>12</sup> Identifying these features of wisdom as the ones

---

<sup>12</sup> Weiss 61.

relevant to the analogy avoids the worry about the facts that wisdom isn't diminished when spent and that it's a non-competitive good.<sup>13</sup>

From (1), we can extract that wisdom is the only “currency” that can serve as an immutable standard of value. I say “currency” because wisdom just is the value that currency represents. This is what it means for wisdom to be the true coin—it is the true value. As the true value, it is what measures all other valuable things. It could only be such a measure if its value were immutable and not subject to social sanction. Indeed, it is the immutable standard of value that the Source of Value Explanation demands.

### *The Proper Exchange*

Once the salient features of the wisdom-coin analogy are laid out, the question becomes the place of virtue. What should we be exchanging for what, and where does virtue fit into the process?

Answering this question requires clarification on what “the things being bought and sold for wisdom and with wisdom” are. Some commentators think the *panta* in b1 refers to virtue, so that the list of virtues in b2–3 is in apposition to *panta*.<sup>14</sup> According to this interpretation, the passage recommends that *phronesis* should be given in exchange for virtue, resulting in a two-part exchange: an agent first trades in PPF for wisdom and then secondly trades in wisdom for virtue. But this interpretation results in a bad metaphor, since wisdom isn't a competitive good such that it decreases when one buys virtue. I follow other commentators who take *panta* in b1 to refer to PPF.<sup>15</sup> This interpretation preserves the parallelism of syntax in the b1 *men*...b6 *de* clauses. If the verbs in each clause (*onoumena te kai pipraskomena–chorizomena kai allattomena*) had different

<sup>13</sup> One alternative interpretation proposed by Bobonich, et al. is that Socrates has in mind the Dependency Criterion (*Meno*, *Euthydemus*). The suggestion is something like the following: wisdom is the true coin because it is the only thing that truly ensures that you secure what you want. I don't think my reading is incompatible with this one, but I take it that the criterion obtains because it's downstream of the fact that wisdom's value isn't socially conferred.

<sup>14</sup> Dorter, Rowe, etc.

<sup>15</sup> See Alieva 227 for more detailed counterarguments.

subjects, with the *men*-verbs referring to virtues and the *de*-verbs referring to PPF, then the contrast that b1 and b6 illustrates falls apart.

On my reading, there is only one exchange, not two: an agent gives up pleasures and in turn receives wisdom, the truly valuable thing, along with its attendant pains and fears. This is the proper exchange. What does it mean for PPF to be bought and sold *for* wisdom (*toutou*<sup>16</sup>) and *with* wisdom (*meta toutou*)? The two different grammatical structures have been taken by some to indicate two separate uses of wisdom in the proper exchange such that wisdom is both the end for which PPF are traded and an element in the exchange along with the PPF. I suggest instead that we think of wisdom as the ultimate grounding value for which we are making exchanges. In virtue of this grounding role, wisdom inflects our transactions in the way that an end structures the processes that lead to it.<sup>17</sup> That is what it means for trades to be made “with wisdom.” [\[Any other suggestions from readers on this point would be appreciated.\]](#)

This exchange which occurs under the guidance of wisdom as a structuring end constitutes true virtue. In offering this reading I depart from commentators who interpret the analogy on the underlying basis that virtue is knowledge.<sup>18</sup> On my reading, virtue is an activity that occurs for the sake of wisdom—it just is making the proper exchange. Only when one buys and sells PPF for wisdom and with wisdom will one have *alethes arete meta phroneseos*. Note that this is a transformative rather than additive notion. That is, I am not holding true virtue in one hand and wisdom in the other. I am holding one thing with both hands, true virtue, which is ‘virtue + wisdom’ as opposed to merely ‘virtue.’

---

<sup>16</sup> I take the *toutou* to be an objective genitive coming off the participles, contra Weiss who takes the *toutou* ‘for wisdom’ to mean ‘as an aim or goal.’ I think this reading is implausible. It is much more natural to take the genitive *toutou* as complementary to the buying/selling participles and the *meta* as ‘with.’ See also Alieva for definitive counterarguments against Weiss’ reading.

<sup>17</sup> Bossi 203 describes wisdom as “the administrator of virtues and organizes life as a whole, keeping a transcending end in view, an end which gives sense and foundation to the exchanges.” Beatriz Bossi, “Which is the Right Exchange to Attain Virtue? (Phaedo, 69a5–c2),” *Proceedings of the Second Symposium Platonicum Pragense*, ed. Aleš Havlíček and Filip Karfík, Prague 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Dorter, Luce, et al.

---

It is helpful to think of the relationship on an analogy to health. If I wanted to achieve health I might aim to hit a target weight, or to maintain a controlled diet, or to be able to do a certain number of pull-ups. If I aim to achieve one of these goals, it's only because reaching the goal is a sign that I am progressing towards being healthy. The individual goal of achieving a target weight serves as a metric by which to judge how well I possess a certain quality, namely health. These metrics are constitutive elements of health. On its own, weighing a certain amount is not desirable unless structured in the context of the ultimate goal of health. In fact, if I were to aim for my target weight in isolation from health, doing so might actually encourage unhealthy behavior such as skipping meals or purging. If I were to hit my target weight by engaging in these unhealthy behaviors, I would have achieved 'weight' but lack 'weight + health' and thus have failed in my initial enterprise. Analogously, an agent could do the virtuous thing accidentally, like stand his ground and fight to his death for the purpose of avoiding the shame of running away. He would thus achieve 'virtue' in that he performed the correct action, but still lack the 'virtue + wisdom' component that renders the action truly virtuous, full-stop.

This analogy also helps us understand why Socrates specifies that this exchange constitutes true virtue "whether PPF are included or discounted." It's an unfortunate fact that what will help me achieve a healthy diet does not always correspond to what is pleasant. If I were to act with a view towards health by weighing the amount of pleasures I had against the amount of pains and fears I averted when eating, I would not be acting according to a standard that progresses me towards a healthy diet. And yet it might be the case that I take pleasure in abstaining from fatty foods and in eating leafy greens. In this case, it would seem that my store of PPF is a good indicator. But this would be a contingent fact about me. Socrates' point is that PPF might be present or they might not be. Their store is tangential to the heart of the proper exchange; I ought to redirect my attention from amassing PPF quantitatively to instead using them as tools to leverage for my greater goal of true virtue. They simply don't matter in the calculation.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> To be clear, there are different ways of interpreting the role of PPF. I will mention two (the ascetic approach and

A counterintuitive result of my reading is that aiming to achieve virtue will *not* be successful in achieving true virtue. An agent might think that in order to do the virtuous thing, she should set true virtue as her goal. But this turns out not to be the case because the only strategy one has to aim at virtue without wisdom is the hedonic calculus, weighing pleasures against pains and fears. Instead, the seeker of virtue should aim at wisdom as the only means to ensure true virtue!

One might object on the grounds that it is misguided to say that I only achieve X when I aim for Y (à la Alieva 223). What other purpose could there be for an exchange other than for something within the actual exchange? If I spend money to buy a car, I'm not making the exchange for the sake of some concomitant like the self-assuredness of getting a new car. I make the exchange because I want the car I'm buying.

First, I find this description of how exchanges work perfectly unobjectionable. If I buy a new Bugatti, I probably want the car, but I could just as easily want the self-assuredness that stems from the admiration I will receive from others for owning a Bugatti. Buying a car for the admiration it inspires is no different from buying a car for the sake of being able to drive to the South Loop Trader Joe's to buy groceries. Exchanges do work this way. Second, this objection is based on a confusion between virtue or wisdom as the goal of the exchange. Again, I emphasize that neither is instrumental for the sake of the other. What I want is not 'virtue' but 'virtue + wisdom' since virtue is only genuine if wisdom is present. I trade in pleasures in return for wisdom and its pains and fears, and this exchange is what constitutes true virtue. Alieva's car-buying analogy obscures the intimate relationship between the elements that the buyer acquires. So, to tighten the analogy, if what I want is not just 'self-assuredness' ('virtue') but 'self-assuredness-that-stems-from-the-admiration-I-will-receive-from-others-for-owning-a-Bugatti,' ('virtue + wisdom') then it becomes clearer that I should pursue buying the Bugatti ('wisdom,' which will get me 'virtue + wisdom') as opposed to 'self-assuredness' without the Bugatti ('virtue').

---

the indifference approach) in discussion of the Purification Metaphor.

This explanation of the non-philosopher's error makes plausible why the hedonic calculator errs in the first place. His error is an intelligent error in that it is perfectly rational to assume that in order to get X, you should aim at X. It is Socrates' claim otherwise that is so surprising. But thus far the description is unclear as to whether there is any redeeming feature of the hedonic calculator. Isn't doing the virtuous thing, albeit accidentally, worth something, even granting that the action falls short of true virtue? The Shadow-Painting Metaphor addresses this question directly. It speaks to whether non-philosophical "virtue" is completely worthless or whether it does have some redeeming value.

#### 4 The Shadow-Painting Metaphor (69b6–9)

Shadow-painting (*skiagraphia*) was a technique used in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE to "simulate our normal optical experience of how light falls on objects."<sup>20</sup> It consisted of several additive techniques that used the interplay of light and shade to create colors. The success of the technique required a viewer to be in a specific stance. When looking from a distance, a viewer could see from afar a faithful three-dimensional representation of the subject of the painting.<sup>21</sup> Upon close inspection, she would see the colors individually and thus lose the coherence of the whole as well as the solidity and dimension of the subject of the painting.<sup>22</sup> This technique is not unlike our contemporary RGB color mode which uses red, green, and blue light in various combinations to reproduce a wide variety of colors, as used prominently in TV and computer screens.

This description of *skiagraphia* naturally raises questions about the Platonic themes of imitation and participation. Petraki suggests that we read the metaphor in light of Plato's middle-period metaphysics. Her interest is in "how a person may bear a property so as to *resemble* the corresponding Form (emphasis original)."<sup>23</sup> Within the metaphor, PPF are colors which are

<sup>20</sup> Pollitt and Tanner, as reported by Petraki, "Plato's Metaphor of Shadow Painting," 3.

<sup>21</sup> Petraki 3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 13.

mixed together to create the illusion of virtue. Wisdom is, however, absent from this metaphor and is thus deprived of being assigned a color in metaphorical terms.<sup>24</sup> The PPF have been shaded and mixed with various methods to create something that resembles a virtue. These resulting virtues aren't pure in the sense that what they really are is a bunch of non-wisdom things that have been manipulated so as to look like virtue. So the flaw of ordinary virtue is that it is commingled with its exact opposite, according to Petraki.<sup>25</sup>

This description of ordinary virtue should evoke the Source of Being reading from Section 1. On her interpretation, this metaphor describes the flaw of the non-philosopher not in terms of standards of value, as in the Coin Metaphor, but in terms of the metaphysical basis of a virtue.

Kraut offers a more moderate view than Petraki does, advocating that we think of ordinary virtue not as a completely illusory appearance, but rather as a lower order of value. What he writes is worth quoting in full:

The virtue of ordinary people is a thin, two-dimensional thing, lacking the full depth of a truly virtuous person. Like a shadow, it has some of the features of what it resembles, because it is similar in shape and size. A painted horse that gives the illusion of three-dimensionality is not completely illusory; it is not like a light beam that looks green even though it is really the opposite color. Similarly, the virtue of ordinary people stems from a thin understanding of what is valuable—thin because it is underdeveloped and lacks the robust complexity that comes only when one's opinions are worked up into genuine wisdom. Their virtue is illusory, then, in that it presents itself as being all there is to virtue, whereas in fact true virtue is a far fuller quality, requiring genuine wisdom rather than the more limited cognitive achievement of those who implicitly realize that there is something intrinsically valuable about virtue, but cannot consistently combine that insight with their other beliefs.<sup>26</sup>

Kraut's position is based on an argument occurring later in the *Phaedo* that implies all souls contain a shadowy form of wisdom—a partial grasp of the good, stemming from the souls' previous contact with the forms when they were disembodied.<sup>27</sup> Because even non-philosophical

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Petraki 14.

<sup>26</sup> Kraut 56–57.

<sup>27</sup> Kraut 56.

souls had this contact, this partial grasp affords them some true opinions that aren't merely lucky guesses. So note that Kraut too has in mind a metaphysical basis for how we might explain the non-philosopher's virtue as not completely misguided.

While I am sympathetic to Kraut's view, I acknowledge that it is difficult to square with Plato's views on shadow-painting in general. Plato uses '*skiagraphia*' once in the *Phaedo*, five times in the *Republic*, and then four more times in the late dialogues (*Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, *Critias*, *Laws*), never in a flattering context. The *Phaedo* usage of *skiagraphia* is straightforwardly pejorative, especially since it is supplemented by the derogatory descriptions of ordinary virtue as "slavish"—presumably because it lacks reason, following Rowe—and as "not sound or true." I take these descriptions to be glosses on shadow-painting instead of standalone metaphors as Gooch does. Reading the descriptions in this way is significant because it shows that the shadow-painting metaphor highlights not the fact that ordinary virtue is an imitation that aspires to true virtue and so gets some features right, but rather the fact that ordinary virtue is a poor imitation of true virtue and so gets all the relevant features wrong.

Contrast Vasiliou's view with Kraut's. Drawing upon the description of ordinary virtue as slavish, Vasiliou states that "the slavish person's ends are avoiding pain and gaining pleasure; he is not concerned about the truth about what the virtuous action is."<sup>28</sup> It would follow that the ordinary person errs without any regard for or access to the truth. But this description strikes me as not quite accurate. Think about the third relevant feature of currency I highlighted in Section 2. The fact that the agent is rationally calculating at all is surely a step above, for example, the tyrant, who is truly enslaved to his desires.<sup>29</sup> Whether I am questioning Vasiliou or Plato himself on this point, I'm unsure.

---

<sup>28</sup> Vasiliou, "Plato's Tripartite Soul," 18.

<sup>29</sup> As gleaned in conversation with Luke Parker.



---

**5                      The Purification Metaphor (69b9–c2)**

This metaphor is responsible for much of the instrumental/intrinsic relationship of wisdom and virtue debate.<sup>30</sup> Virtue is the state of the soul that is purified of the influence of the body, as described at 67c5: “Does purification (*katharsis*) not turn out to be what we mentioned in our argument some time ago, namely, to separate the soul as far as possible from the body?” By calling wisdom a purgative or a purificatory rite (*katharmos*) and virtue a purged state (*katharsis*), it sounds like Socrates construes wisdom as the means by which one acquires virtue. But the same point from earlier holds: wisdom is indeed the means to true virtue from the point of view of virtue-acquisition, but wisdom is the ultimate prize. The philosopher's search for wisdom isn't motivated by the ultimate goal of virtue; virtue is more of a welcome concomitant. We mustn't forget the context of The Exchange Passage as a whole—Socrates is answering the question of why the philosopher is the most virtuous and thus the language of the three metaphors will reflect the fact that the primary interest is in how to properly attain virtue.

In previous sections, I claimed that virtue just is the activity of making the proper exchange. So how can I square my interpretation with this metaphor, which suggests that virtue is a state of the soul? To fill in the gap, we must invoke Socrates' belief that our actions directly impact the states of our souls. Think of the impure soul which performed impure deeds in the underworld. Impure deeds are “actions of souls of this kind (93b6).” Myths of the underworld in other texts corroborate the *Phaedo* position. A virtuous state of soul is a symptom of a wise soul. That is to say, the soul that performs a virtuous action is a wise soul.

To unpack the Purification Metaphor, we can look to Vasiliou, who claims that the ordinary person errs not because of purity of motive for its own sake but because of the way he identifies

---

<sup>30</sup> The metaphor is important especially to Gooch's interpretation of the virtue-wisdom relationship, and he maintains that though he doesn't fully accept that wisdom is instrumental here, wisdom does play a double role, one of which is instrumental to acquisition of virtue, another of which is identical to virtue. He calls it a contradictory “running together” and embraces the ambiguity and contradiction (Gooch 159). My interpretation has the distinct advantage of side-stepping this murkiness.

what the virtuous action is. The error is that the ordinary person is ruled not by virtue and objective truth but by PPF:

The only faculty that could know what the *truly* virtuous action is is reason. While the body might tell a person what she fears or desires, only the mind (soul) can say what is true about virtue, once it is assumed (as Socrates does assume, cf. 65d) that the Just itself, the Good itself, and so on, are objects of knowledge whose existence and nature are independent of our attitudes towards them.<sup>31</sup>

This diagnosis unites the Source of Being and Source of Value Explanations for the non-philosopher's error. The body with its attendant PPFs convinces the soul that virtue is grounded in something it's not, namely maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain and fear. In fact, wisdom is what grounds virtue. The philosopher, in recognizing that one ought to seek wisdom as opposed to pleasure if she wants to achieve true virtue, has already made a cognitive achievement by identifying virtue's correct source of being. In the language of the Shadow-Painting Metaphor, the ordinary person is complacently viewing from far away, while the philosopher has adopted a close stance so as to avoid deception. But adopting the correct stance alone is not enough to qualify her as virtuous. She must act by seeking wisdom. It is identifying wisdom as the correct source of being that allows the philosopher to use wisdom as the proper yardstick, or source of value. And it is in this usage that true virtue manifests.

Once wisdom is chosen as the only thing that can say what is true about virtue, how does it have a cleansing effect? Other than a cognitive reordering of priorities, how, exactly, does this purification occur? One might take a strong form of asceticism and advocate active suppression and avoidance of PPF (Ebrey) or an indifference approach where PPF may or may not be involved in the process as long as their value is properly assessed and not exaggerated (Woolf, Weiss). Given that my own thinking on this issue changes drastically from week to week, I will flag these options for now, to be explored in a future paper.

---

<sup>31</sup> Vasilou, "Plato's Tripartite Soul," 18. Note that he is referring here to the Shadow-Painting Metaphor, but I think the Purification Metaphor lends itself to this reading more so than the Shadow-Painting Metaphor does.

## VI Why is the Philosopher Most Courageous?

Recall our initial reason for examining the three metaphors of the Exchange Passage. Why is the philosopher most virtuous? What is the philosopher getting right? And what is the non-philosopher getting wrong?

Now we can see why the philosopher is most virtuous. It's well-known that "doing philosophy" just is "seeking wisdom." So the philosopher, practically by definition, aims at wisdom in the most direct manner possible, by loving it and seeking it through the activity of philosophy (that is, through the activity of loving and seeking wisdom!). Only by doing this activity does she become truly virtuous, instead of being condemned to the illusory virtue of the non-philosopher, who aims at virtue alone and in doing so fails to accomplish true virtue. Armed with their understanding that wisdom is the proper end to achieve, philosophers transcend the naïve view<sup>32</sup> that C causes C.

It's an interesting fact that non-philosophers err *because* they make the reasonable assumption that C causes C. In aiming for courage without the guidance of wisdom, an agent's only resource is quantitative amassing in the form of hedonic utilitarianism. In Sections 3–5, I attempted to show that the illogicality obtains doubly. While The Coin Metaphor highlights the illogicality in terms of its consequences for our actions, the Shadow-Painting and Purification Metaphors follow closely behind to ground the value-illogicality in its metaphysical basis.<sup>33</sup>

In sum, the Source of Being and Source of Value Explanations are two dimensions of the same problem. The Source of Being Explanation obtains because the body is the necessary condition for the soul's acting, but it would be incorrect and misguided to think that desires stemming from the body are true desires of the soul. The soul has its own ornaments (courage, moderation, truth) (115a) and we would be wrong to value goods that service the body except insofar as it's necessary (64e). The Source of Value explanation obtains because to live and act

<sup>32</sup> Meant deliberately to echo the language of hypothesis in the intellectual autobiography.

<sup>33</sup> It might even be the case that the entirety of the *Phaedo* mirrors this transition from ethical grounding to metaphysical grounding. To be defended in another paper.

according to the standards of value dictated by the body, namely PPF, is to live an *alogos* existence. What we need to ground our actions is something capable of conferring an immutable standard of value. That something is wisdom, which is the only thing that renders all other actions virtuous and thus valuable.

## VII Conclusion and Speculative Preview

In Section 1, I considered “P3: Courage causes courage” to explain the philosopher’s insight in distinction from the non-philosopher’s mistake. My suggestion was that Socrates doesn’t appeal to this explanation because P3 isn’t true. The account I’ve sketched in Sections 2–5 explains why it is that P3 isn’t true: it is wisdom that causes courage. True virtue is what it is through its participation in wisdom.

I acknowledge that many questions remain, so I will conclude by considering two of the most worrisome. My responses will be admittedly speculative.

### *Unity of the Virtues?*

How, then, are the virtues differentiated from one another, if wisdom is the cause of them all? Dorter offers a clever solution to this problem that is popular amongst commentators. He suggests that human wisdom just is practical application of wisdom in the form of acting virtuously. So while the philosopher’s ultimate goal might be divine wisdom, she needs to cash out some of this wisdom in a human way, namely by acting virtuously. The metaphor is “applied to the behaviour of the wise person which changes (e.g. from temperate to courageous) to meet the circumstances but has its basis in the underlying unchanging identity of wisdom and virtue.”<sup>34</sup> Though I disagree with his identity claim, his basic suggestion for differentiating the virtues is promising. Although metaphysically speaking the virtues just are wisdom, and are thus essentially

---

<sup>34</sup> Dorter 31

one, each virtue is differentiated qualitatively from the others by the context of the “cash out” or the practical usage of the wisdom that the philosopher possesses.

Vasiliou offers another consideration in favor of this view. For the disembodied soul, “possessed of wisdom and dwelling with the gods in eternal contemplation of the Forms,” it’s difficult to see how virtues like courage or temperance would be relevant. Certainly the post-mortem attainment of true knowledge of, for example, the Form of Temperance will have no practical effect in the sensible world or on the Isles of the Blessed.<sup>35</sup>

Drawing on Dorter’s and Vasiliou’s considerations, my speculative claim is that virtue is wisdom embodied and wisdom is virtue disembodied. Virtue and wisdom only come apart when we speak of embodied souls. The relationship is an asymmetric one in the sense that wisdom is the proper cause of virtue and the body as a source of action is a mere necessary condition for virtue. True virtue in the form of seeking wisdom is the best we can hope for as humans because we cannot leave our bodies and temporal existences behind until death, where a virtuous soul separated from the body just would be a wise soul. So we can distinguish virtue from knowledge, and hence one virtue from another, with the introduction of the body’s activities.<sup>36</sup> A fuller version of this view would require an account of the differences between human and divine wisdom-virtue, as well as a detailed account of how dimensions of action could differentiate one virtue from another.

*Is virtue really just a “welcome concomitant” of wisdom?*

It is admittedly flat-footed to claim that the philosopher doesn’t seek virtue, so I should attempt to explain why it is that virtue is often described as a worthy goal in the dialogues. To revisit the health analogy from Section 1, health is an abstract and elusive goal. But I can break it down by going to the doctor and getting tests done or going to the gym and seeing how fast I can

---

<sup>35</sup> Vasiliou, “Plato, Forms, and Moral Motivation,” 58.

<sup>36</sup> This account is compatible with Callard’s view that true virtues manifest in philosophical conversation rather than on the battlefield or in the house of pleasure.

---

run a mile. These milestones in measurement are good in themselves in that they are constitutive of health but also visible markers of it. Charting my progress towards health in terms of these measures allows me to gauge how far or close I am to my goal.

In the same way, wisdom is abstract and elusive. Remember that a philosopher is characterized by her love of wisdom, not necessarily by her possession of it. In the same way as with health, I might need an observable marker to measure how far or close I am to my goal of wisdom. Such observable markers would be exhibitions of virtue in action, whether courage is enduring in philosophical conversation or remaining in my post on the battlefield. As an outward manifestation of an inward state, the extent to which I perform virtuous actions is a metric that functions as an observable insight into the state of my soul. By gauging the extent to which I'm virtuous, I can gauge the extent to which I am close to wisdom. Virtue is desirable as a sign of a wise soul.

This is not to say that either wisdom or virtue are dependent on appearance or outward observation, or that this feature alone is what makes them desirable. But it seems to me that in order to secure the protreptic dimension of virtue- and knowledge-acquisition, a seeker would have to have some markers of progress.

One advantage of such an interpretation is that it offers readers a way to make sense of Socrates' joint conjunctions to, on the one hand, seek wisdom and truth and to, on the other hand, seek virtue and avoid injustice. My thought is that they are two ways of describing the same activity. Consider Socrates' defense in the *Apology* and his defense in the *Phaedo*. Socrates is forced to speak about virtue and vice to a general Athenian audience since these seem like attainable, concrete goals to most non-philosophers, whereas when he speaks to the philosophers in his inner cadre, he can speak bluntly about wisdom and truth, goals which might not motivate non-philosophers. A fuller version of this view would require surveying his different audiences throughout the dialogues as well as developing an explanation for why Socrates doesn't just help the poor guys out and tell them to seek wisdom, if indeed doing so is the only way to attain virtue.

### Translations

- Archer-Hind, R. D. (Richard Dacre). *The Phaedo of Plato*. New York: Arno Press, 1973.
- Barnes, Jonathan. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Bluck, R. S. (Richard Stanley). *Phaedo*. London: Routledge & Paul, 1955.
- Burnet, John. *Plato's Phaedo*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911.
- Gallop, David. *Phaedo*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- Grube, G. M. A. (George Maximilian Anthony). *Five Dialogues*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. / Rev. by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co., 2002.
- Hackforth, Reginald. *Phaedo*. Cambridge: University Press, 1955.
- Rowe, Christopher. *Phaedo*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

### Secondary Literature

- Alieva, Olga. "Economic metaphor in the *Phaedo* 69a6-c3." *Platonic Investigations*, Vol. 5 (2016): 220-237.
- Bailly, Jacques. "Commentary on Beere." In *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 27, 289-300. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011.
- Beere, Jonathan. "Philosophy, Virtue, and Immortality in Plato's *Phaedo*." In *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 27, 253-288. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011.
- Bobonich, Christopher. *Plato's Utopia Recast: His Later Ethics and Politics*. Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Bostock, David. *Plato's Phaedo*. Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Butler, Travis. "Socrates and Philosophical Practice." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23, No. 5 (2015): 821–842.
- Dorter, Kenneth. *Plato's Phaedo: An Interpretation*. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1982.
- Ebert, Theodor. "Why is Evenus Called a Philosopher at *Phaedo* 61c?" *The Classical Quarterly* Vol. 51, No. 2 (2001): 423-434.
- Gooch, Paul W. "The Relation Between Wisdom and Virtue in *Phaedo* 69a6-c3." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (April 1974): 153-159.
- Gosling, J. C. B. (Justin Cyril Bertrand), and C. C. W. (Christopher Charles Whiston) Taylor. *The Greeks on Pleasure*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Gower, O. S. L. "Why is There an Autobiography in the *Phaedo*?" *Ancient Philosophy* 28 (2008): 329-346.

- Halper, Edward C. "The Currency of Virtue: *Phaedo* 68c-69d." Forthcoming.
- Hoinski, David F. "Context, Decision, and Autobiography in Plato's *Phaedo*." *Ancient Philosophy* 28 (2008): 347-354.
- Horky, Philip Sidney. *Plato and Pythagoreanism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Jansen, Sarah. "Plato's *Phaedo* as a Pedagogical Drama." *Ancient Philosophy* 32 (2013): 333–352.
- Kraut, Richard. "Ordinary Virtue from *Phaedo* to the *Laws*." In *Plato's Laws*, edited by Christopher Bobonich, 51-70. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Lane, Melissa. "Virtue as the Love of Knowledge in Plato's *Symposium* and *Republic*." In *Maieusis: Essays in Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat*, edited by Dominic Scott, 44–67. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Lorenz, Hendrik. *The Brute Within: Appetitive Desire in Plato and Aristotle*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Luce, J. V. "A Discussion of *Phaedo* 69a6-c2." *Classical Quarterly* 38 (1944): 60-64.
- Morgan, Kathryn. "Paying the Price: Contextualizing Exchange in *Phaedo* 69a-c." Forthcoming.
- Petraki, Zacharoula. "Plato's Metaphor of 'Shadow Painting': Antithesis and 'Participation' in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*." *The Classical Journal* 114, No. 1 (October–November 2018): 1-33.
- Robins, Ian. "*Phaedo* 82d9-84b8: Philosophers' Understanding of their Souls." *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 36, No. 1 (March 2003): 1-23.
- Sedley, David. "The Dramatis Personae of Plato's *Phaedo*." In *Philosophical Dialogues: Plato, Hume and Wittgenstein*, edited by Timothy Smiley, 1-26. Oxford: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Shipton, K. M. W. "A Good Second-Best: 'Phaedo' 99b ff." *Phronesis* 24, No. 1 (1979): 33–53.
- Spitzer, Adele. "Immortality and Virtue in the *Phaedo*: A Non-Ascetic Interpretation." *The Personalist*, 57 (Spring 1976): 113–25.
- Vasiliou, Iakovos. *Aiming at Virtue in Plato*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Vasiliou, Iakovos. "From the *Phaedo* to the *Republic*." In *Plato and the Divided Self*, edited by Rachel Barney, Tad Brennan, and Charles Brittain, 9–32. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Verdenius, W. J. "Notes on Plato's 'Phaedo.'" *Mnemosyne*. Fourth Series, Vol. 11, Fasc. 3 (1958): 193–243.
- Weiss, Roslyn. "The Hedonic Calculus in the Protagoras and the *Phaedo*." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27, No. 4 (October 1989): 511-529.
- Weiss, Roslyn. "The Right Exchange: *Phaedo* 69a6-c3." *Ancient Philosophy* 7 (1987): 57–66.
- Wolf, Raphael. "The Practice of a Philosopher." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 26 (2004): 97-129.