Outline of The Phaedo

There is an inner story and an outer frame: Phaedo recounts the scene at the prison.

Introduction: Xantippe and crying babe sent away; Socrates muses on the inseparability of pleasure and pain. The topic of the dialogue is set: The wise man will not fear death. The two interlocutors most heard from, Simmias and Cebes, are Pythagoreans. Crito appears at the end.

I: Death and suicide:
S: The wise man will not fear death, but he will not commit suicide. We are the property of the gods; property is not allowed to act unilaterally; so we must wait until the gods free us.
C: But Socrates—if that were so, and the gods are good, the wise man should wish to stay with his good owners, rather than fleeing them into death...the wise man should grieve to die, and only the fool rejoice.
S: Oh, you cute thing! But I do believe that the gods are good, and that if so, death must represent a good thing for a good man. [and, by implication: S considers himself one such.]

II: Death is a good thing, not to be feared: indeed, philosophy is the study of death.
S: Do we believe that death is something? [=elenchic 1st premise. The alternative, death is nothing, is suggested clearly as the other possibility in the Apology, but is not pursued in this dialogue. Indeed, if death were just a cessation of sensation, the interlocutors might well agree it was nothing to be feared; so this is the alternative that needs to be pursued here.]
Sim: Yes—the separation of the soul from the body.
S: The true philosopher does not care for pleasures of the body, nor for things learned through the senses. So he has already virtually separated his soul from his body, and attains truth best when furthest from the senses and the body, for that is when he is best able to reason clearly. (64, 65)

Further: do we agree that there is such a thing as absolute justice? And absolute beauty, and absolute good? “the essence, or real being; the very truth of things”
Sim: Of course!
S: But they are not apprehended by the senses, but if at all, by the intellect. The body troubles the soul, and keeps her from gaining truth and wisdom. (66a)
So: if it be not possible to have pure knowledge while the body is with us, either we cannot gain knowledge at all, or we can gain it only after death. (67a)

II: Immortality of the soul:
Cebes: but Socrates—what if the soul dies, too? (70a)
Socrates: Well, let us consider...

(1) Argument from opposites (70e-72b)
--and a sub-argument from entropy (72 d)

(2) Argument from recollection, which is here presupposed as something already agreed upon from previous discussions (73c)
S introduces association of ideas: If I see Simmias’ cloak, I think of him...
Then he introduces the idea of defective association, and reinvokes from 65 the notion of ‘absolute F’—in this case, absolute equality. (From the sight of equal particulars we can form a question about what makes them the thing they are; whatever that is, it must be what “absolute” equality represents...)the particulars are some times equal and sometimes not (=this stick is equal in length to another identical stick, but unequal when compared to a different stick), but what it is for x to be equal to y remains the same throughout. [interesting that our text talks about “abstract” in 74c3]

Socrates makes the point that this applies not only to sensible particulars,
but applies as well beauty, justice and piety. He then connects this with the argument from recollection: although equal sensible things are not identical with absolute equality, they are associated in our mind by ‘defective association.’

Typical Socratic wiggle: “if these ideas exist, does it not at once follow that our souls must have existed before we were born, and if they do not exist, then neither did our souls.” (76e)

Hmm. That’s well and good, Socrates—but you’ve only “proved” the pre-existence of the soul. What if it DID exist earlier—but nonetheless dies with us???

(3) **Argument from the nature of the soul**

- Distinction between two kinds of existence (79a)
- Alliance between body and the visible, v the soul and the invisible/pure/immortal/divine/unchangable/intelligible/indissoluble
- [Socrates goes even further here; he talks about ghosts, and transmigration; the probable afterlife of different kinds of men; and reiterates (82-3) the ideal of the philosopher as ascetic, loathing the body and fleeing everything associated with it—ascetic priest, in short.]
- (dreamy pause in which everyone contemplates this glorious idea…) 84 c-d

Objection: analogy with the lyre: is the soul the harmony (order or arrangement) of the parts of the body, or the elements that make it up?

Analogy with the tailor’s last coat

At this point we back out of the story into the frame: Yah, Phaedo—I’ve often thought the idea that the soul is a harmony was really super! (88d)

S: strokes Phaedo’s hair and warns against misology. (89d)

Returning to the previous discussion of whether the soul is a harmony, S suggests several problems with that suggestion:

- It is incompatible with our doctrine of recollection,
- and with our independent belief that the soul is the leader, the body follower;
- that idea of the soul suggests that all men have the same or identical souls, and in particular, that no soul has any discord or vice (but we don’t think that of men)

Simmias and Cebes agree that if they have to choose between the harmony of the soul and the doctrine of recollection, they’ll go with the latter.

(4) **Argument from generation and decay:** 96a-106a (=”the argument from The Forms”)

a--Socrates summarizes the argument to this point, which he puts entirely in terms of “what you (interlocutors) seek.” The demand is not just for the pre-existence of the soul, but its immortality.

b--Socrates pauses for quite a while: then he recounts a rather implausible tale of his interests in his youth; his personal existential aporeia, when he decided he’d never find what he sought; and his encounter with the writings of Anaxagoras.

c—digression on Anaxagoras:

He liked about Anaxagoras that his theory affirmed that MIND was the cause of all things.

But he regretted about Anaxagoras that his ‘mind’ seemed to be a peculiarly mechanical and, if not lifeless, at least mind-less causal force. He wanted from Anaxagoras not a source of motion and change, but an explanation of why, if things were a certain way, it was BEST that they be so.

It’s as if, he complains, that if asked why Socrates sat here in prison awaiting his death, he were given an explanation in terms of the composition of his body, and the way his legs bent, rather than in terms of the accusations of the Athenians and his own decision that it was better and more honorable to accept the verdict rather than try to escape it. That’s not what he sought in terms of ‘causes.’ He wishes to search instead for “the binding force of good, which really binds and holds things together.” (99c)

d—the “second string to his bow:” to take at least this hint from Anaxagoras, and to look for the ‘causes’ in the sense he preferred through the mind—not through the earth-air-fire-water of the physical world, the body and its senses.

i—to have recourse to conceptions, and to stick firmly to the most rational explanations
ii—I will begin with the assumption that there exists absolute beauty, and good, and greatness

iii—if any [concrete thing, phenomena] is beautiful, it is so because it partakes of absolute beauty—because of the presence or communication, or whatever you please to call it, of absolute beauty.

   --the same is true of largeness

iv—you would agree, no doubt, that you know no way in which a thing can be generated except by participation in its own proper essence—

   --for instance, to be two something must participate in duality.

Very true! exclaim the interlocutors.

Even the frame-story pair chime in at this point: “I think the clearness of his reasoning, even to the dullest, is quite wonderful!” Phaedo: “They had admitted that each of the Ideas exists, and that Phenomena take the names of the Ideas as they participate in them.”

--examples of size: I, a concrete thing, am at the same time smaller than an elephant and larger than a cat. But the Small Itself cannot participate in opposites simultaneously, but must flee before the opposite; Large can in no way be small.

--examples of heat and cold: snow cannot become hot and remain snow, nor can fire become cold and remain fire

“then it is true of some of the things that not only the idea itself has a right to its name for all time, but that something else which has the form of the idea wherever it exists, shares the name.” (103e)

--so: it is not only opposite ideas, which appear not to admit their opposites; things also, which are not opposites, but which always contain opposites, seem as if they would not admit the idea which is opposite to the idea that they contain. They either perish or retire at its approach.”

Some things, on the other hand, aren’t like that. Three is both Three, but also odd…

v—So! Now let us look for causes. What must be in a body to make it feverish is heat; what must be in a number to make it [even is duality]—

C: Yes, Socrates!
S: What must be in the body to make it alive?
C: The soul, Socrates!
S: And is there an opposite to life?
C: Yes—death!

S: And we have already agreed that the soul can never receive the opposite of what she brings! So the soul is immortal; AND imperishable, and like God.

Following this proof of the immortality and imperishability of the soul, Socrates draws some conclusions about what it needs to take with it into the next world, and then launches into an absolutely appalling and unintelligible cosmology, which I shall SKIP (and I suggest you do likewise).

Skip to 114d: a typical Socratic qualification:

“A man of sense will not insist that these things are exactly as I have described. .For these reasons a man should be of good cheer, and if he has honestly pursued the pleasures of learning and adorned his soul with temperance and justice and courage and freedom and truth, he will be ready for whatever awaits him in the next world.”

Death Scene: “Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius. Do not forget to pay it.”