

My Encounter with Plato and the Greatest Human Evil

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I am a philosophy major because of Plato's *Phaedo*. Yet, philosophy is not a way of life that has come easily for me. Oddly enough, I have always been made nervous by any kind of philosophical discussion. My extreme dislike of arguments was overwhelming until I read the *Phaedo*. This dialogue made me consider that my hatred of argument might be one of the greatest evils that a human being can encounter.¹

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates' friends similarly express a budding hatred of arguments. To set the scene, the *Phaedo* takes place on Socrates' last day in prison. Socrates will die in mere hours, and his terrified friends are shocked at his calm demeanor. To assuage their fear of death, Socrates presents a series of arguments for the immortality of the soul. After Socrates gives his argument concerning the invisibility of the soul, interlocutors Simmias and Cebes overturn his argument and send everyone else in the room into a spirit of despair. The narrator, Phaedo, comments, "after we'd been so powerfully persuaded by the previous argument, [Simmias and Cebes] now seemed to shake us up again and to cast us back into distrust" (88c). He remarks, "who

¹ I use argument throughout this essay to mean both a set of premises leading to a conclusion and, more broadly, dialogue with others aimed at discovering the truth.

knows, we might be worthless judges, or these matters themselves might even be beyond trust” (88c). Clearly, Socrates’ interlocutors are beginning to doubt their own ability to know the truth and the attainability of truth itself.

This despair is a terrifying moment in the dialogue. Socrates has spent his entire life examining, challenging, and articulating arguments with others for the sake of attaining the truth.

He remarks in the *Apology*, “as long as I breathe and am able to, I will certainly not stop philosophizing” (29d). The activity of examining arguments in pursuit of truth is what makes life worthwhile. Socrates sacrifices everything for the life of the argument, including his very life. Despite all of this, Socrates’ friends, indifferent to the value of argumentation, are about to give up. Too many arguments have let them down, and they begin to think that arguments, and even their own selves, cannot be trusted. Socrates has sacrificed everything to keep the dialogue alive; but if his friends give up, the life of the argument will die with him.

To avoid this great tragedy, Socrates tries to save both his friends and the life of the argument. While their fear of death *is* evil, Socrates claims that there is an evil far worse than this, one that has already begun to destroy them. This evil is the hatred of arguments, or misology. The misologist ceases to dialogue because he has found “that there’s nothing sound or stable” in arguments. He will spend the rest of his life “hating and reviling arguments[,] robbed of the truth and knowledge of the things that *are*” (90d). By rejecting the value of arguments, the misologist misses out on dialogue with others and so misses out on the opportunity to know the truth. This pursuit of truth is

what makes life worthwhile. If an individual hates and rejects arguments, he loses a piece of what it means to be human.

You can imagine my shock when I, someone who considered herself excused from such dialogue, encountered Socrates' claim that I was living a less than human life by refusing to participate in the meaningful dialogue that is argumentation. I realized that my aversion to arguments was due to fear: fear of being wrong and sounding dumb. I was just like Theodorus, who is also terrified of arguments and will do anything to avoid them. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates sharply reprimands him by asking, "if you went to Sparta, Theodorus, to the wrestling gyms, would you think you had the right to look at the other people naked, some of them in bad shape, and not strip down yourself to display your form in return?" (162b). I wished I could see myself in Socrates, but I saw myself in Theodorus' fear and hatred of arguments instead.

Can one rise from such a dismal state? Is it possible for people like Theodorus, Socrates' friends, and me to return to the argument and welcome it as a crucial part of the truly human life? Reflecting back on the conversation with Socrates, Phaedo remarks "how well he healed us and, as if we were men who'd fled and been laid low, rallied us and turned us about to follow him and consider the argument with him" (89a). Socrates rescues his friends when they are on the brink of succumbing to the greatest evil for a human being.

First, Socrates explains the process by which they have fallen into this trap. A misologist is born when an innocent individual encounters an argument and naively trusts it in its entirety. He later discovers that the argument seems false. He repeatedly falls into the same pattern of excessive trust and eventual disappointment. Having been

deceived so many times by seemingly false arguments, this individual concludes “that [he] alone [has] detected that there’s nothing sound or stable - not in the realm of either practical matters or arguments” (90c).

The defect of the misologist involves two excesses. First, there is the excessive trust of arguments, which is problematic because arguments are not completely correct all of the time. After the individual imprudently trusts in arguments without scrutiny, he realizes that some arguments are not what they seemed to be, and he then considers all arguments to be untrustworthy. As a result, he falls to the opposite extreme and distrusts all arguments. Both excesses are to be avoided because most arguments have aspects of truth and falsity within them. In reality, arguments are like people, where “both the really good-natured and the really wicked are few, and ... most people are in between” (90a).

What the misologist lacks is a prudent disposition that will take the time to discern between what is true and what is false. We see an example of this lack of prudence in Socrates’ friends’ excessive trust in his argument from invisibility. They lack prudence; they fail to be critical of the argument itself because they are so preoccupied with *who* is presenting the argument. Their attachment to Socrates the person prevents them from seeing the flaws in his argument. Socrates knows that this is an issue for his friends. He urges them,

if you’re persuaded by me and give little thought to Socrates and much more to the truth, you must agree with me if I seem to you to say what’s true; and if I don’t, you must strain against me with every argument you’ve got. (91c)

Again, I find myself making mistakes right along with Socrates’ friends. They place excessive trust in Socrates’ argument, fall into error, and then fall into despair once they

realize their error. This is a danger that I, and perhaps other students, experience as well. I often, for example, trust certain books or professors in their entirety and fail to think about the truth of their arguments independently. When I discover that even one of their arguments is flawed, I despair, and that misological attitude begins to grow within me again.

The example of Socrates' friends emphasizes the danger of a lack of caution in the realm of arguments. An inability to be critical in the face of arguments leads to hatred of arguments, and this aversion makes an authentic pursuit of truth impossible. If one wants to live a fully human life, it is necessary to be critical of arguments, even those that are presented by trustworthy people.

Socrates also warns against placing excessive trust in one's own arguments simply because they come from oneself. He warns that those who prefer victory over wisdom "don't give a thought to the way it is with the things the argument's about, but put their hearts into this: that what they themselves put forward should seem to be the case to those present" (91a). Socrates implores his friends to care less about impressing others with their words and more about being attentive to the words that communicate truth, no matter who says them.

This last warning seems like a final admonition to know oneself. We should not put too much trust in our own arguments, because we, like all other human beings, can be wrong. We need the humility that the misologist lacks to successfully pursue the truth in arguments. Because pride blinds us to the way things really are, we cannot even enter the conversation if we lack humility.

The lessons of this dialogue matter for every human being. We all want to know the truth and to participate in the conversations that lead to truth. Of course, it is at first challenging to join with others in this pursuit; arguments are sometimes deceptive, it is uncomfortable to challenge the ideas of others, and it can be hurtful to have one's own ideas rejected. It is no wonder that Socrates calls the continued argument a "renewed battle" (89c). For some, it is terrifying to consider truly and honestly the arguments of others, perhaps most principally because arguments have the potential to open one's eyes to the truth, and this awakening may compel a rejection of former ways of thinking. The prospect of needing to abandon one's previous ideas about the world is terrifying.

The difficulty involved in this process cannot prevent us from trying, however, because participation in the life of the argument is a crucial part of what makes life worth living. The refusal of individuals like Theodorus to engage in argumentation is a refusal to consider the possibility of being wrong; it is dishonesty of the worst kind: dishonesty with oneself. A life of self-delusion is not worth living, and it is a refusal to be like this that has compelled me to "enter on the argument" with Socrates and all of a similar mind to him (91c).

Works Cited

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