

PHIL 447/547:

Friends of the Forms: Reading Plato's *Phaedo* in light of his *Sophist*

There's a famous digression in Plato's *Sophist*, known as the "battle of gods and giants" (*gigantomachia*), which articulates a disagreement between idealists and materialists. One party thinks that the real is the corporeal. The other — "the friends of the forms" — thinks that the real is the intelligible. Plato criticizes both and puts forward what is known as the Eleatic Principle: the real is the powerful, or being is power (*dunamis*). This definition or characterization of being gathers material and intelligible reality into a single concept.

In this course we will use this digression as a springboard to a close study of Plato's *Phaedo*: the *locus classicus* for his theory of Forms. Many readers identify Socrates' positions in this dialogue with those of the friends of the Forms in the *Sophist* (a late dialogue), and so they interpret the battle of gods and giants as part of a larger revision and self-criticism of Plato's earlier metaphysical views, represented by the *Phaedo*.

Was Plato a friend of the forms at the time he wrote the *Phaedo*? This question will guide us throughout the course as we study this challenging text. According to a widespread interpretation, Plato's Socrates advances a revisionary theory of the nature of beings as metaphysically and epistemologically grounded in transcendent forms, i.e., intelligible entities unlocated in space and time. The friends of the Forms arguably hold the same position which Plato rejects or seriously revises by the time he writes the *Sophist*.

Students will study and evaluate the standard interpretation of the theory of Forms and its relation to the Friends textually, as well as theoretically by reading ancient and modern criticisms of so-called Platonic realism, i.e., the view that the nature or properties of things is grounded in a primitive relation of participation (or "imitation") in abstract entities.

We will also consider an alternative interpretation. Throughout the *Phaedo*, Socrates alludes to Pythagorean teachings. According to the Pythagoreans, things imitate numbers such that the nature of everything is in the final account mathematical. Plato's Forms seem in some ways akin to Pythagorean numbers, but we have reasons to suspect that Plato ultimately rejects Pythagoreanism in the *Phaedo*. By exploring these Pythagorean themes, we will come to a sharper understanding of Plato's metaphysical project in the *Phaedo* and why he might not be a Friend of the Forms after all.

Enrolled participants will be required to attend weekly meetings, submit 8 short (1-2 pp.) responses, and a final paper (15-20 pp.)