In the first part of the *Phaedo* Socrates gives two interrelated reasons why the philosopher is glad to be quit of the body: its pleasures mean nothing to him, since he values the pleasures of learning and wisdom; and the body does not promote, indeed hinders the acquisition of wisdom. This hindering is itself twofold: as it were externally, the body makes demands on the soul’s attention for its care; and internally, when the soul uses the bodily senses in its pursuit of the truth it is led astray. I shall be concerned with this last criticism of the bodily senses: how do they internally hinder the search for truth? I shall argue that there are two ways in which they do so, corresponding to two conceptions of adequate explanation Socrates develops in the dialogue.

In explaining how the senses fail the philosopher in his search for the truth, Socrates offers two separate reasons. First, appealing to the poets for confirmation, he claims that even what seems to be the most informative of our senses, sight and hearing, offer us “nothing accurate or clear.” Socrates’ second reason is, I suggest, meant to be a philosophical reformulation of this poetic objection to the sense. Socrates introduces, as the objects of the philosopher’s sought-for wisdom, things that are each “what it is,” i.e. the Platonic Forms, which cannot be grasped by the senses. When we attempt to use the senses to understand them, Socrates remarks, they (the senses) “confuse” the soul (cf. ταράττοντος 66d5). Socrates does not explain here how he understand the “confusion” produced by the senses. I shall argue that his comment is something of a placeholder that is only clarified later on in the dialogue, in Socrates’ discussion of scientific method at 95e-101e. In that
discussion Socrates is motivated by a particular version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason which we may call the Principle of Adequate Explanation: any explanation needs to *make intelligible* that which it explains. As it has been put: such an explanation must invoke entities that are *such as* to account for the facts to be explained. The three so-called laws of causality that Socrates invokes in rejecting the explanations of his materialist predecessors give implicit content to the notion of an intelligible-making account. These “laws” (adapting Sedley’s formulation) are: an entity invoked to explain why anything is F (1) must not be un-F; (2) its opposite must not be the explanation of anything’s being F; (3) it must never explain anything’s being un-F. In illustrating these principles, Socrates uses mostly mathematical examples (e.g., 10 is greater than 8 by 2), where sense perception does not seem to be directly responsible for the inadequacy of the explanation. But when Socrates illustrates how the Form of Beauty does not fall afoul of this principle when explaining beautiful things, he contrasts that explanation with explanations that invoke sensible qualities (e.g., “florid color” 100d1), and claims that the latter “confuse” him (cf. ταράττομαι, 100d3). Presumably they do so because, while they may be present in beautiful things, they are also present in ugly things, and may be thought to be just as responsible for the ugliness of the latter as they are for the beauty of the former. The problem with the senses, then, is that when sensible things are adduced as explanatory entities, they fail to make intelligible what they are invoked to explain. They are not suited to be explanantia. But that does not mean that they do not have another, important role in scientific inquiry.

The concept of an adequate explanation so far advanced is incomplete; it only establishes a necessary condition on explanantia. In his autobiography
Socrates reports his encounter with a more substantive conception of what would count as an adequate explanation: the teleological explanation which he find implicit in Anaxagoras’ doctrine of Nous. This provides Socrates with another necessary condition on explanantia, and indeed one which, together with the earlier formal condition, may constitute necessary and sufficient conditions for adequate explanation. Furthermore Socrates’ discussion of this new teleological requirement puts the role of sense experience into a new perspective. In illustrating teleological causation with the example of his own remaining in jail, Socrates distinguishes between the “things without which the responsible factor (αἴτιον) could not be the responsible factor” and the responsible factor (or explanans) itself. The former, it seems clear, are sensible entities. To imagine that these can provide adequate explanations results in something worse than confusion: namely, what Socrates calls “being blinded” (cf. τυφλωθείην 99e3). The image here, I shall argue contrary to recent orthodoxy, does indeed refer to the occlusion of teleological explanation, which results from looking to sensible phenomena for explanatory factors. However, I shall also argue that the new method that Socrates says he “jumbles up” after the disappointment of his hopes for teleological explanation does not merely turn away from the sensible. Rather, the “more subtle” cause that Socrates ends up pursuing is precisely one that attempts to relate the non-explanatory, sensible necessary conditions for a cause to the non-sensible formal cause for which they are necessary. The “jumbling up” (cf. φύρω 97b7) Socrates mentions in fact refers to his joint use of material-sensible factors and the truly explanatory formal explanantia. The reference to ‘jumbling’ is ironic; Socrates’ method keeps the empirical and the formal each in their proper place.