

*Why, according to Plato, is the human soul immortal?
How important is this for Plato's theory of human understanding?*

Plato's arguments for the immortality of the human soul, and its importance for his theory of human understanding.

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Introduction

In his discourse on the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo* Plato reminds me of a salesman, with a repertoire of sales pitches to persuade the punters and close the sale. If the simple *argument from opposites* doesn't convince, then he will try the *argument from recollection* and if that fails too he will invoke Forms in the *argument from affinity* and if necessary, *the final argument*.

I will discuss each of these arguments in my own terms and try not to paraphrase or plagiarise too much. Verbatim extracts from Plato et al are rendered in an *italic* font and referenced to their source via digits in square brackets and the numbered References in the end notes. All the *Phaedo* extracts are from [1], with the relevant Stephanus number in the margin.

As usual, Plato's *Phaedo* is a Socratic dialogue. Plato writes an account as if it were reported speech of Socrates and his philosophical followers, on the day of his death. But it reads more like a script than a transcript, we cannot believe these arguments (and objections) were ever uttered like that. So Plato is putting his words into Socrates' mouth and it seems likely that the Ideas (that is Forms) idea is mainly Plato's own. Clearly Socrates and Plato were both great philosophers but for me it is disappointing that Plato chose to use Socrates as a character to put his own (Plato's) point of view. It seems that Plato thought it was a good idea to conflate a historical narrative (Socrates did live, was tried and executed etc) with a philosophical treatise; maybe he thought that the truth of the narrative part would somehow validate the philosophical part.

Plato's main purpose seems to be to reach a conclusion which he has determined is the right one, almost by whatever argument his reader will accept. So his Socrates character proposes various arguments which might seem insufficient to many, and his Simmias and Cebes characters pose some objections for Socrates to refute. Although Plato writes that Socrates and the others did have some reservations, he never seems to explain how he (Plato) evaluated the various arguments and reached his preferred conclusion. Maybe that is all part of his philosophic method; maybe his conclusions were based not so much on evidence as on faith.

The argument from opposites

Socrates lists several reversible processes: bigger-smaller; stronger-weaker; faster-slower; better-worse. Then, he proposes that:

71a *Are we satisfied, then, that all opposites are brought about in this way – from opposites ?*

Socrates convinces his stooges that as the dead come from the living, which is plausible, it follows that the living must come from the dead. I think the great flaw in the argument from opposites is that it is a poor inductive argument based on a very bad analogy, dying is clearly not a reversible process like expanding or accelerating or warming. It is easy to conduct a thought-experiment (or a real experiment) with a thermometer in a beaker of water and supply heat, and then remove it – cooler becomes warmer and reverts. It is not so easy to observe the live becoming dead (which does happen inevitably) and then the dead becoming alive again.

But in Plato's account everyone is convinced and he reaches:

72a *So we agree upon this too: that the living have come from the dead no less than the dead from the living. But I think we decided that if this was so, it was a sufficient proof that the souls of the dead must exist in some place from which they are reborn.*

Not content though, with this *sufficient proof*, Plato adds a supplementary argument based on a conservation theory of souls. His Socrates argues that unless souls are re-cycled after death and re-used again in life then the stock of extant souls would dwindle away and human life would become extinct:

72c *if everything that has some share of life were to die and if after death the dead remained in that form and did not come to life again, would it not be quite inevitable that in the end everything should be dead and nothing alive?*

In all this Plato (and Socrates) seem to ignore the very evident fact that life begets life at childbirth, and that one life may lead to many lives in the next generation. If each live person must be equipped with his/her own individual human soul from the stock of souls separated at death from their previous bodies, then souls would very soon be out of stock.

Apparently, for Plato and his contemporaries it was widely accepted that living creatures were somehow animated by a kind of life-force, which was attached to the body at birth and separated from it at death. If we go along with this and accept that the human soul is our life-force, then we need a mechanism for creating many souls from one, to keep up with the growth in human population.

The argument from recollection

Plato uses his Cebes character to introduce the next argument:

73a *Besides, Socrates, there is that theory which you have often mentioned to us – that what we call learning is really just recollection. If that is true, then surely what we recollect now we must have learned at some time before; which is impossible unless our souls existed somewhere before they entered this human shape. So in that way too it seems likely that the soul should be immortal.*

Cebes refers to the example given by Plato in the Meno, when Socrates helps Meno's slave boy to learn about the area of a square. Extracting from the Meno (86 a-b) [2] for a change:

And if there have been always true thoughts in him, both at the time when he was and was not a man, which only need to be awakened into knowledge by putting questions to him, his soul must have always possessed this knowledge, for he always either was or was not a man?

...

And if the truth of all things always existed in the soul, then the soul is immortal. Wherefore be of good cheer, and try to recollect what you do not know, or rather what you do not remember.

Back at the Phaedo, Socrates developed the argument from recollection by explaining that when we perceive external objects, it may bring to mind memories of other external objects; or of internal, abstract ideas, like equality. He argued that in order to compare two objects we must already have a concept of equality itself, and that this could not be learned via sense-perception because no two external objects are exactly equal. Also, because we can see and compare things from the moment of birth we must have obtained our knowledge of equality before that.

So absolute equality, equality itself, is the first Platonic Form introduced in the Phaedo. When we first compare things we do so by recollecting our innate concept of equality, and that concept must have been pre-installed, with our human soul, before birth.

Socrates continues, explaining that the argument applies equally to all the other Platonic Forms, including beauty, goodness, justice, and piety. Simmias and Cebes are convinced that the soul must exist before birth but feel it is not proved that the soul must survive after death. Socrates insists that the one implies the other:

77d *It has been proved already... If (i) the soul exists before birth, and if (ii) when it's born into life, it can only be born from death or the dead state, then surely it must also exist after death, bearing in mind that it has to be born again.*

In the spirit of recollection, I was reminded of Descartes in his 5th Meditation [3], and of my DACE course on Modern Philosophy last year [4]. Descartes was meditating two thousand years after Plato but he noted:

...I discover innumerable particulars respecting figures, numbers, motion, and the like, which are so evidently true, and so accordant with my nature, that when I now discover them I do not so much appear to learn anything new, as to call to remembrance what I before knew, or for the first time to remark what was before in my mind, but to which I had not hitherto directed my attention.

The argument from affinity

In this argument Socrates seeks to show that the soul is invisible and unchanging like Plato's Forms, therefore, like them, it must also be indivisible and eternal, or immortal.

He begins by trying to allay fears that the soul might just vanish away when the body dies. He enquires:

78c *What sort of thing is it that would naturally suffer the fate of being dispersed?*

leading on to:

Would you not expect a compound or a naturally composite object to be liable to break up where it was put together? And ought not anything which is really incomposite be the one thing of all others which is not affected in this way?

Having established that indivisible things are least prone to dissipation, Socrates needs to show that the soul is indivisible. He sets out to show that the soul is invisible and unchanging like Platonic Forms, which are also held to be indivisible. He neglects to point out in the *Phaedo*, what he later determines in the *Republic*, that the human soul comprises three parts.

First, he recalls his previous examples of Forms, equality itself, beauty itself etc and gets Cebes to agree they are all constant and invariable, in contrast with particular instances of those things, which may actually be perceived in the external world. So the forms themselves are unchanging and invisible while the particulars are visible and never free from variation.

Socrates determines that every quality can be classified in two ways, into an invisible, invariant, abstract, concept of the thing itself, and into a class of particular instances of the thing, which are perceptible and subject to change. Then it seems logical, to Socrates at least, that as each person may also be classified into two parts, body and soul, these must somehow correspond with the classifications of Forms themselves and particulars. He encourages Cebes to choose whether body or soul is more like the invisible, unchanging Forms than the visible, variable particulars. Cebes obliges and finds that the soul is invisible and invariable, like the Forms themselves.

80b *...this is our conclusion from all that we have said. The soul is most like that which is divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble and ever self-consistent and invariable, whereas body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible [ie perceptible], dissoluble and never self-consistent.*

Finally Socrates reaches:

80d *... the soul, the invisible part, which goes away to a place that is, like itself, glorious, pure and invisible – the true Hades or unseen world – into the presence of the good and wise God (where, if God wills, my soul must shortly go) will it ... be blown to bits and destroyed at the moment of its release from the body, as most people claim? Far from it.*

No wonder Socrates was content to die. He was looking forward to departing this mortal coil for an afterlife in Hades, discoursing with the souls of better men than he lived among, and serving good gods there, having discharged his duty in life to the worldly gods who presided over Athenian justice.

The attunement theory, an objection by Simmias

Plato uses Simmias to raise this objection, a theory popular with Pythagoreans, so that Socrates can refute it. Simmias explains that the soul might be regarded as a kind of harmonious tension, an attunement, of the bodily elements. He says:

86a *...the attunement is something invisible and incorporeal and splendid and divine, and located in the tuned instrument, while the instrument itself and its strings are material and corporeal and composite and earthly and closely related to what is mortal.*

This theory doesn't suit Socrates of course because it implies that the soul is intimately bound up with the body and could not exist independently, either before or after life. Socrates relies on his previous arguments, and reminds Simmias that he accepted them. If the soul exists before birth and retires to Hades after death then the attunement theory must be wrong.

But this theory suits me very well. I am an atheist (and maybe a Humanist) but I quite like the idea of having a soul. I am also a physicalist and a monist (not a substance dualist) but I would like to regard my soul as an alternative, filtered, view on the sum of all my parts. Like Simmias' attunement, my soul is intimately bound up with my body and cannot exist without it. For me then, my soul is certainly not immortal and only existed before birth as much as I did, developing in the womb from my zygote. To quote myself from [4]:

Many dualists believe that the mind can somehow 'live on' after bodily death, in a spirit world or reincarnated in a new body, but that doesn't seem important to me. Whatever the truth of the mind-body relationship, they must be pretty closely intertwined, my assumption is that my mind and body have been working together since I became a viable foetus and will cease together when I die. The only way people should expect to 'live on' is in the memory of a few others, and (potentially) in the thoughts of many others via their legacy of writings, or music, or whatever.

The tailor's cloak, an objection by Cebes

Cebes' objection is simply that although he might agree that the soul could continue after death of the body, and even be re-born into the next body, that does not imply that the soul must be eternal, that is, undying. Cebes likens the soul to the tailor's cloak, which is still in good condition when the tailor dies. It might even be worn by another (via the Oxfam shop) and conceivably survive its new owner's death too. But eventually the cloak will become worn out.

88b *... no one has the right to face death with any but a fool's confidence, unless he can prove that the soul is absolutely immortal and indestructible. Otherwise everyone must always feel apprehension at the approach of death that in this particular separation from the body his soul may be finally and utterly destroyed.*

Strong stuff, to a man about to drink hemlock, and more difficult for Socrates to refute than Simmias' objection:

96a *What you require is no light undertaking, Cebes. it involves a full treatment of the reasons for generation and destruction.*

Which leads us, at last, to the final argument.

The final argument

This argument depends on an understanding of Platonic Forms, and Plato's Socrates begins with a rehearsal:

100a *...I propose to make a fresh start from those principles of mine which are always cropping up; that is, I am assuming the existence of Beauty in itself and Goodness and Largeness and all the rest of them.*

For Socrates, the reason any particular comes to have a property is simple, it partakes in the relevant Form itself. He was not interested in saying two becomes two by the addition of one

to one, or the subtraction of one from three, or even the division of ten by five. Socrates would say simply that two becomes two by participating in Duality.

Each Platonic Form is the very essence of the thing itself and could never bestow its particulars with attributes of the opposite Form. Similarly each Form and its opposite are mutually exclusive:

103c *...now we are speaking about the qualities themselves, from whose presence in them the objects which are called after them derive their names. We maintain that the opposites themselves would absolutely refuse to tolerate coming into being from one another.*

Socrates illustrated this with reference to the Forms of Heat and Cold and the particular instances, of fire and snow:

103d *... snow, being what it is can never admit heat and still remain snow. It must either withdraw at the approach of Heat, or cease to exist.*

This is an important result, snow and fire are not Forms themselves, they are particulars, but each cannot partake of the opposite Form to that which is essential to its nature (ie Cold for snow and Heat for fire), it would cease to exist first.

Socrates went on to establish that for some things, participation in a particular Form was essential; the thing could not be that thing otherwise. He gives a mathematical example involving a set of objects participating in the Idea of Three (104d). That set must also participate in the Form of Odd; although three is not oddness itself, it could never be even.

We are reaching the crux. Socrates asks:

105d *...what must be present in a body to make it alive?*

He receives the required response, the soul, and argues that the soul must be the body's life-force and therefore it must participate in the Form of Life. So far so good for me but just about here the going gets tough. By his previous argument, at the approach of Death what must the soul do? It must (i) withdraw to Hades and erudite discourse in the world of Forms or (ii) cease to exist.

I don't think Plato intended that the human soul is a Form, like Beauty and Justice and Life and all the rest, although André and some of the class apparently do. That implies a distinct eternal Form for every soul that ever existed (and, necessarily, still exists) which seems at odds with the notion of each Form being the unique essence of the thing itself, and the One Over Many Principle [5]. In the argument from affinity Socrates did not argue that the soul actually was a Form, just like one, His conclusion that because the soul is similar in some respects to Forms themselves the soul must be immortal, seems like wishful thinking to me.

If I am right, Plato intended that the human soul is a particular, partaking in the Form of Life (and other Forms too probably). Then conclusion (i) above is not a problem for Socrates but conclusion (ii) definitely is; Plato must still show that the soul may not perish at the approach of Death.

He does this by sleight of hand I think, arguing that Life is a very special Form in that instances of it could not die, they are imperishable by definition:

105e ... what do we call that which does not admit dying?
Un-dying.
So the soul is un-dying.
Yes, it is un-dying.
Well, can we say that that has been proved?
Most completely, Socrates

Aye, right.

A little later Plato still feels the need to clarify:

106d *So now in the case of the un-dying, if it is conceded that this is also imperishable, soul will be imperishable as well as un-dying. Otherwise we shall need another argument.*

There is no enthusiasm for that at all and Socrates quickly reaches:

106e *So it appears that when death comes to a man, the mortal part of him dies, but the un-dying part retires at the approach of death and escapes unharmed and indestructible.*

Bring on the hemlock.

Plato's theory of human understanding

This is going to be short and off the cuff, my essay is too long already and Christmas is imminent (even if I am not a subscriber).

I expect that Plato's theory of Forms was more important to his theory of human understanding than the immortality of the human soul, although his 'proof' of the latter relied very heavily on the former.

Throughout his works Plato advocates the virtue of a philosopher's life over that of an 'ordinary' person. The philosopher is said to pursue an understanding of the Forms themselves, and to that end he/she eschews material distractions and concentrates on Forms, illuminated by the Idea of the One Good.

The world of Forms is separate from the external world we inhabit and access via sense-perception, that is a pale and imperfect reflection of the world of Forms. Plato's Forms represented the real virtues we should aspire to, even if the particular instances of them that we can perceive are inadequate. These virtues include Justice and Beauty and Goodness etc so an understanding of them is very important for managing a well ordered society. Plato argued that philosophers get closest to the truth of these matters, so a philosopher should be king.

Plato illustrated his theory on human understanding and the acquisition of knowledge with his Sun metaphor and his Line and Cave allegories. Each outlined a progression of understanding from an ill-discerned and, in some sense, deluded state to an enlightened knowledge of the real virtues.

Philosophers, if Plato's immortal soul theory was right, had the advantage of looking forward to an afterlife in the world of forms itself, where all the inhabitants were eternal. I suppose that there they could become very well acquainted with the true nature of each virtue – and be re-born into the body of the best possible philosopher king.

References

1. Phaedo in *The Last Days of Socrates* - Plato, Penguin Classic. (translated by Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant).
2. Meno in *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Meno*, by Plato (translated by Benjamin Jowett) at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1643/1643-h/1643-h.htm>
3. Descartes' *Meditations: Meditation V* – of the essence of material things and, again, of God; that He exists – John Veitch Translation of 1901 at <http://www.wright.edu/cola/descartes/meditation5.html>
4. In *Chapter 4 The mind-body problem* of *Notes on Modern Philosophy* by John Coleman at http://www.dalriada.org.uk/files/Uploads127/Notes_on_Modern_Philosophy.pdf
5. e.g. Plato in *Republic X Republic 596a* at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Plat.+Rep.+10.596a>
We are in the habit, I take it, of positing a single idea or form in the case of the various multiplicities to which we give the same name.