

Plato's *Phaedo*



The immortality of the soul (69e-80c)

- The argument from opposites (70d-72e)
- The argument from recollection (72e-77a)
 - Background: The *Meno* (80d-86c)
 - Dilemma: “A man cannot search ... for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for.” (80e)
 - To solve the dilemma we must suppose that we start out in a state of *partial* information.
 - Socrates’s proposal: “As the soul is immortal, has been born often, and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before.” (81c)
 - Recollection is not the only solution to the dilemma, but it suffices.

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- The argument from recollection (cont.)
 - To learn (in this present life) is to recollect (72e).
 - Recollection occurs by association, i.e., when perceiving one thing brings to mind another. (73c)
 - Association depends on noticing similarities and dissimilarities (74a).
 - Since similarity comes in degrees, we have to judge it against an absolute standard, i.e., the Form of Equality (74a).
 - Knowledge of the Equal can't be derived from observation of particular things (e.g., sticks and stones) because such things are never perfectly similar or dissimilar to each other (74b-c).
 - Hence, “[w]e must ... possess knowledge of the Equal before ... we first saw the equal objects and realized that all these objects strive to be like the Equal but are deficient in this.” (74e-75a)

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- The argument from recollection (cont.)
 - “But we began to ... perceive [such objects] right after birth.” (75b)
 - Hence, we were either born with knowledge of the Equal or we recollect it (76a)
 - We can't have been born with it because “[a] man who has knowledge would be able to give an account of what he knows,” but not “everyone can give an account of the [Forms].” (76b)
 - Therefore, we must have acquired knowledge of the Forms before birth and “our souls [must have] existed apart from the body before they took on human form.” (76c)

Is this argument for the immortality of the soul convincing?

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- The argument from recollection (cont.)
 - Problems
 - Obj. 1: That learning is recollection has not been established. If it was the *only* way to solve the dilemma of the *Meno* we'd have a decent argument for it, but it's not the only way.
 - Obj. 2: Having forgotten knowledge of the Equal *at birth* doesn't entail that our souls existed *before* our bodies, since we had bodies before birth.
 - Plato could defend the argument here if he could show that *only* disembodied souls could directly acquire knowledge of the Forms. But how would this argument go?
 - Obj. 3: Even if the argument is sound, it only establishes the *preexistence* of the soul, not its immortality.

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- The argument from the nature of the soul (78b-80c)
 - Could it be that after death the soul is “scattered” (77d)?
 - We must ask “[w]hat kind of thing is likely to be scattered?” and determine whether the soul is of that sort (78b).
 - Composite things are liable to scattering, whereas simple (i.e., non-composite) things are “not likely” to scatter (78c).
 - Changing things are composite, whereas non-changing things are “most likely” to be simple (78c).
 - The Forms are unchanging, whereas the bodily, “visible” things that participate in the “invisible” Forms can and do change (78d-e).
 - The soul is more like the unchanging, invisible, divine Forms than the body is (79e).
 - Hence, it is “natural for the body to dissolve easily, and for the soul to be altogether indissoluble, or nearly so.” (80b)

Is this argument convincing?

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- The argument from the nature of the soul (cont.)
 - Problems
 - Obj. 1: At its core this is an argument by analogy. Such arguments are probabilistic at best.
 - Obj. 2: The analogy, however, is weak, for even if souls are like the Forms in some important respects, they are *unlike* the Forms in other, equally crucial respects.
 - Most significantly, souls must be changeable; otherwise, a soul couldn't be *harmed* by vice and *improved* by virtue.
 - The argument, however, assumes that changeable things are composite, from which it follows that the soul *is* liable to “scatter.”

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The objections of Simmias and Cebes (84c-107b)

- Soc.: “There are still many doubtful points and many objections for anyone who wants a thorough discussion of these matters.” (84c)
- Simmias’ objection to the third argument (85e-86d)
 - “[A] harmony is something invisible, without body, beautiful and divine in the attuned lyre, whereas the lyre itself and its strings are physical, bodily, composite, earthy, and akin to what is mortal.” (85e-86a)
 - Thus, harmonies are like the Forms in several respects, if then the soul’s similarity to the Forms ensured its indissolubility, then harmonies should also be indissoluble, but they’re not. (86a-b)
 - Also, if “the soul is a kind of harmony” among the body’s parts, then, “when our body is relaxed or stretched without due measure by diseases and other evils, the soul must be immediately destroyed, even if it be most divine.” (86c)

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- Socrates' response to Simmias (91c-95a)
 - The objection contradicts the thesis that learning is recollection, which Simmias accepts (92a).
 - Thus, “if ... a harmony is a composite thing, and ... the soul is a kind of harmony of the elements of the body” then a soul could not exist before the body. (92a-b)
 - Also, harmonies come in degrees, whereas souls don't. (93a-b)
 - Since souls don't come in degrees, if souls were harmonies, then all souls would have to be equally harmonious. But this is wrong: virtuous souls are more harmonious than wicked ones. (93b-94a)
 - Finally, “a harmony does not direct its components, but is directed by them” (93a), whereas a virtuous soul “rules over all the elements of which ... it is composed, ... directing all their ways.” (94c-d)

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- Cebes' objection: The soul might “wear out” over time (87a-88b)
 - It's not enough to show that the soul is “stronger and much more lasting than the body,” (87a) for even “if one were to grant ... that the soul's nature is so strong that it can survive many bodies, ... if ... one does not further agree that the soul is not damaged by its many births and is not ... altogether destroyed in one of those deaths,” then for all one knows, one of those deaths might “[bring] about the destruction of the soul.” (88a-b)

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- Socrates' response to Cebes (95a-95e, 105c-107a)
 - Death redefined: “This then is death, the destruction of the soul.” (91d)
 - The soul is essentially deathless (105e).
 - “If the deathless is indestructible, then the soul ... would also be indestructible.” (106e)
 - “Therefore the soul ... is most certainly deathless and indestructible and our souls will ... dwell in the underworld.” (107a)

Is this convincing?

- No. It still needs to be established that “the deathless is indestructible,” i.e., that anything *not dead* is indestructible.