

PLATO AND THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

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1. Introduction

Everywhere and always, man has pondered over the destiny which awaits him after death, and has attentively listened to those who could speak to him of the mystery of the hereafter. But today, when the anarchy of ideas is restlessly spreading everywhere, when men and women are feverishly seeking to find new roads to 'the other world', when many others, weary and worn, desperately hurl themselves into the rut of materialism or become mournfully indifferent to the most essential questions of the soul – it is surely opportune to restate the truth concerning facts which, for lack of being seen as they really are, cause doubt and anguish to some and elicit a smile of incredulity from the others.¹

How should we study the soul and the life hereafter? Plato has some answers:

But to know its [the soul's] true nature we must view it not marred by communion with the body and other miseries as we now contemplate it, but consider adequately in the light of reason what it is when it is purified, and then you will find it to be a far more beautiful thing and will more clearly distinguish justice and injustice and all the matters that we have now discussed. (*Republic* 611 b10-c6)²

Then here too – in despising the body and avoiding it, and endeavoring to become independent – the philosopher's soul is ahead of all the rest. (*Phaedo* 65 c11-d2)

This is the challenge that Plato throws at any student who seeks to understand the nature of the soul. This paper is an attempt to examine Plato's views on the immortality of the soul. It begins by examining Plato's proofs and then uses them as a base to launch

out on a vindication of the spiritual principle of man. We will restrict ourselves to the consideration of the proofs of the immortality of the soul as found in the *Phaedo*, the *Republic*, *Phaedrus* and *Laws*.³

2. Proofs for Immortality in the *Phaedo*

It is interesting to note, as David Gallop observes, that

Plato does not offer a set of discrete self-contained proofs of immortality, but a developing sequence of arguments, objections and counter arguments. As the dialogue unfolds, the earlier arguments are criticized, refined or superceded, until Socrates' belief in immortality is finally vindicated... The closely integrated arguments of the *Phaedo* contrast sharply with the solitary and quite different proofs of immortality in the *Republic* (608c-611a) and *Phaedrus* (245c-246a).⁴

What is the purpose of the arguments in the *Phaedo*? Hackforth answers:

[I]t is I would say, to extend and deepen, through the mouth of a consciously Platonised Socrates, the essential teachings of Socrates himself, namely that man's supreme concern is the 'tendance of his soul'.... That is, for Socrates and Plato alike, the way of philosophy, and only by following that way can man attain real well-being or happiness; only in the philosophic life can the soul's desire be satisfied and the aim of the true self be fulfilled.⁵

Having observed the aim of the arguments presented by Plato, we will now proceed to examine them individually.

2.1 *The Cyclical Argument (Phaedo 70 c5-72 e1)*

The principal goal of this argument, for Plato, is the vindication that the soul continues to be 'something' after death. He begins by quoting an ancient Orphic doctrine that all things

continue to be reborn and to die. In real life “whatever comes to be comes to be ‘out of its opposite’.”⁶ We can call a thing hot, only if previously it has been cold. Only a person who was previously running slowly, can begin running faster. Thus we have two processes: one of increase, and the other of decrease. A body may increase in heat, and a little later it may become cold again. There is a process of generation from one state to the other.

Socrates also mentions two other cyclic processes. They are the processes of sleeping and waking, and of dying and being born again. As before, only a being that was dead can come to life, and only a living being can perish.

Besides this verification from nature there is also the question of universal balance, for “if there were not a constant correspondence in the process of generation between the two sets of opposites, going round in a sort of cycle, if generation were a straight path to the opposite extreme without any return to the starting point... in the end everything would... reach the same state, and change would cease altogether” (*Phaedo* 72 a10-b4). Thus ultimately all living beings would be dead and would remain dead. The universe would cease to exist, life would perish. This is absurd. This is the essence of the first argument of Plato.

2.2 The Argument from Recollection (Phaedo 72 e2-78 b3)

The argument from recollection is based on the Socratic theory that “all knowledge is a recollection.”⁷ This is a well-known Platonic theme, which is prominent in the *Meno* (80d-86c). Here ‘learning’ chiefly refers to ‘understanding’.

Often a person on seeing or hearing something is reminded of something else. For example, we can imagine how a lover feels when he recognises an object belonging to his loved one. This association may be of two types: Association by Resemblance (I see a portrait and recognise the person); and Association by Contiguity (I see a hat and am reminded of the owner). In the first case, the association is based on something that resembles the person; in the second it proceeds from something of a nature other than that of the person.⁸

Besides similarity a person is also conscious of perfect or partial resemblance. We talk of the equality of two sticks that have similar physical and chemical properties; yet, we are aware that they are not absolutely equal. In the field of moral behaviour, we have certain ideals of justice, goodness, uprightness and holiness by which we judge individual moral acts. In spite of our best efforts we find ourselves falling short of these ideals. But from where do we get these ideals?

There are two alternatives. We may have been born with them (ideal standards), or we may be merely reminiscing what we knew previously. But we know that these ideals come even before we have seen and experienced them (they are beyond sensible experience). Hence, they point to pre-natal experience. Our souls had this knowledge even before being united to our bodies, and then we forgot it at birth. Our knowledge through the pre-existence of souls points to the existence of the 'world of Forms'.⁹

This proves that the soul existed before birth. Socrates shows how when coupled with the previous argument of "generation of opposites"¹⁰ we have here a proof to show that the soul is born, dies and is again reborn. (*Phaedo* 77c1-d5) This cycle goes on interminably and proves the soul's immortality.

2.3 *The Argument from Affinities (Phaedo 78b4-84 b6)*

This argument is based on the intrinsic nature of the soul. It aims at establishing immortality by showing the simplicity and divinity of the soul.¹¹

Socrates begins by postulating that experience shows composites to be mutable and incomposites to be immutable. It is also highly probable that composites are inconstant and vary whereas incomposites are constant and invariable. Absolute reality like the forms of goodness and equality belong to the latter category. They are invisible; whereas all that we perceive by virtue of our senses vary and is inconstant.

Our bodies, too, belong to the world of visible reality while our souls are invisible. In fact, our soul when it acts independently is able to enter into contact with the *Absolute Forms*. This points

to the divine nature of the soul. Hence, the soul being incomposite is immutable, invariable, constant and immortal.

After this proof Socrates gives a short mythical description of man's state after rebirth. According to him it depends on the type of life one lives. The sensual will suffer, (*Phaedo* 81d6 ff); whereas the honest and upright - especially philosophers will - attain the divine nature (*Phaedo* 82c2 ff) Therefore, all men must learn how to cultivate themselves by placing their senses under discipline and by abiding in the company of reason.

2.4 The Objections of Simmias and Cebes: The Reply of Socrates (Phaedo 85b9-102a1)

The listeners, among who are Simmias and Cebes, raise two objections. They are important in the context of immortality, for they echo difficulties often expressed by science today. Simmias is an epiphenomenalist, who believes that the soul is nothing more than an effect of the body. Cebes, on the other hand, proposes a mechanist difficulty based on the Law of Degradation of Energy. Socrates tackles both objections and draws important conclusions.

2.41 The Objection of Simmias (Phaedo 85b9-86d3)

Proceeding from the Socratic description of the soul as invisible, splendid and divine; and the body as material, corporeal and composite; Simmias uses a new analogy. He compares the body to a harp, whose invisible and splendid harmony is the soul. When the harp is destroyed; the harmony will be heard no more. Similarly, the soul ceases to exist when the body dies.

2.42 The Objection Of Cebes (Phaedo 8 e6- 88 b7)

Cebes upholds the superiority of the soul over the body; and, also agrees to the proof that the soul must have existed before the body which it incarnates (the argument from Recollection) He compares the soul to a weaver, who makes many cloaks. But, ultimately, the last cloak outlives the weaver. In the same manner,

the soul after infusing many bodies may disintegrate. We cannot accept death stoically, because our present life may be the last cloak that the soul wears before its destruction.

2.43 *The Reply of Socrates (Phaedo 89c9-102 a1)*

Socrates first warns his audience against *misology*. By this he means the skepticism in the field of knowledge that proceeds from repeated failure to reach conclusive arguments. This is often caused due to lack of a painstaking and acute examination of the logic of the argument.

In reply to the objection of the Simmias, Socrates first points out to the incompatibility of holding the pre-existence of the soul simultaneously with the attunement theory. It would be absurd to posit the existence of a harmony without a harp, or a whistle without an engine.¹² Next, he points to a fact of experience. We often see the soul acting independently and even surmounting bodily instincts like hunger, thirst, etc. This would not be so, if the soul were a mere product of the body, just as a tune depends so radically on the harp. Further, if the analogy of the harp is true; and the soul is a harmony of the body, then better-tuned souls would be more harmonious and more real than others. This stand is untenable, for all souls are equally real. This theory of attunement cannot account for moral differences between souls i.e. good and bad souls. For all these reasons Socrates discards the objection of Simmias. (*cf. Phaedo* 91c5-95a3).

Socrates thinks that the mechanistic objection of Cebes can be tackled in another way. He brings in his own personal experience to answer this problem. At a young age he was deeply influenced by the discipline of natural science. He began with the biological and cosmological theories of contemporary thinkers like Empedocles, Zeno and Heraclitus. But he was not satisfied for they did not give adequate reasons for the natural phenomena. Anaxagoras' doctrine, which captivated Socrates, was not able to "carry reason" into the field of cosmology. The principal mistake in these thinkers was that they confused 'cause' with "necessary (accessory) conditions"¹³ Thus, they would explain the phenomena

of sitting as the result of a particular arrangement of muscle, bones, sinews and flesh. This failed to explain why Socrates was sitting calmly the day before his execution, when he could have run away to escape his fate. Socrates' sitting had more to do with his decision to abide by the judgement of a legally constituted court. (cf. *Phaedo* 95a4-100c2)

Socrates, therefore, outlines his own theory and method. He begins by hypothesizing a 'postulate'. By examining all its consequences freeing it from internal contradiction, defending it against basic objections and deducing it from more basic and ultimate principles, he wants to reach a simple postulate which all admit.

The rest of his answer to the objection is a prelude to and premise for his last argument in the *Phaedo*. He explains illustratively the working out of his own method. Seeking to know the nature of the beautiful or what makes a thing beautiful, one is forced to admit that it is not a particular shape or color; but, participation in the form 'beautiful'. There are other forms like 'largeness', 'smallness', 'goodness' which have objective existence in the world of ideas (cf. *Phaedo* 100c3-102a9).

2.5 *The Argument from the Reality of Forms* (*Phaedo* 102 a10-107 a1)

This argument is very important because it is based on Plato's pet doctrine of the reality of the 'World of Ideas'. To begin with Socrates makes a distinction between *essential predication* and *relative predication*.¹⁴ The argument proceeds along the following lines. When we say that A is taller than B, but shorter than C; we admit the relative 'tallness', as well as the relative 'shortness' of A. Does it mean that 'tallness' and 'shortness' are both forms in which A participates. No, because they are opposite forms, and it is not in virtue of being A that we predicate tallness and shortness of a person. If A is short, then tallness cannot be an essential predicate of his. We can only say: "He is tall when compared to B." This does not contradict the first argument of 'generation of opposites' There we spoke of 'things', which become 'hot' after being 'cold'. Here, we speak of the 'predicates' (qualities,

forms) themselves.¹⁵

There are certain things that participate in ‘forms’ in *essential character*. Fire is never ‘cold’, nor is snow ‘warm’. Hence, if fire is brought near ‘cold’ it will either ‘withdraw’ or be ‘annihilated’. The number ‘three’ is odd, and we do not have ‘even triplets’; just as we cannot have a ‘square circle.’

In the case of the soul, which is the principle of ‘life’; we say that the soul participates in the form ‘life’. The opposite of life is ‘death’. Thus ‘life’ and ‘death’ are contraries. Hence the soul being the cause of ‘life’ can never admit ‘death’. They are opposed and incompatible. The soul is also ‘imperishable’ being *divine*. Hence, when death draws near it, the soul is not ‘annihilated’; but withdraws. In this way Plato provides an example of the deduction of a primary postulate. At the end of this proof, Socrates reiterates his faith in the Supreme as the ultimate basis of *immortality*. (*Phaedo* 106e8 ff)

3. Proofs for Immortality in the Other Dialogues

3.1 *The Argument in the Republic* (Republic 608d3- 611a2)

In the context of the use of Art, Socrates brings up the topic of the immortality of the soul. He begins in a new straightforward manner. This proof is meant to supplement those already existing in the *Phaedo*.

Socrates begins by defining ‘good’ and ‘evil’. ‘Good’ is that which preserves and benefits and ‘evil’ that which “destroys and corrupts”. The only evil that corrupts a thing is its congenital evil (that which belongs to its nature). The eyes can be damaged irreparably by ophthalmia and iron by rust. On the contrary, the good will never destroy; and a neutral thing will never harm. In the case of the soul we have injustice, cowardice, ignorance which are evils to it. Through our experience we know that none of these destroy a man’s soul; often the unjust man seems to thrive in the midst of sensuous living. The diseases of the body cannot affect the soul. Hence, since nothing can destroy the soul, we can say that it is imperishable.

3.2 *The Argument in the Phaedrus (Phaedrus 245c4-246 a2)*

The *Phaedrus* argument is based on the principle of the soul as self-movement. Every process or activity or movement must have an origin. This origin is in that which moves itself continuously by nature, and is also the source of movement of all other things. The nature of this “first principle” excludes its coming into being from another. Then if it did it would cease to be a self-activating being. Similarly it must be imperishable, for if it were destroyed nothing else would come into being. Ultimately all reality would disappear since all depends on it. Hence, it is impossible for a first principle (or self-activating being) to come into existence or go out of existence. It is immortal. But, the ‘essence’ and definition “of the soul is “self-motion”; it gives life to the body. Hence, it is immortal.¹⁶

3.3 *Argument in the Laws (Laws 895 e12- 896 b4)*

The small passage in the *Laws* is not exactly a proof. It repeats the notion of the soul as “self-movement”, and repeats that the soul being the first mover must be prior to all things, and also, the universal cause of all change and motion. This is only an explanation of the definition, and a demonstration.

3.4 *Reason for the proofs*

Having looked at the various ways in which Plato, with Socrates as his mouthpiece, seeks to prove the immortality of the soul, we can make one observation. The goal and purpose of these proofs is not to show the intellectual genius that Socrates was; but, to provide a basis for man’s moral life - a life of justice, peace, and friendship with others.

4. Critical Evaluation of the Proofs

In this section we will critically evaluate the major arguments cited in Section 1 of this paper. For this I have had

recourse to the views of some scholars on Plato, as well as to personal reflection. We must remember that the proofs do not aim so much at logicity and cohesiveness, as at justifying a moral order in this life; and the serenity and confidence one must have in the face of death. Thus they seem intended to educate the audience of Plato as to the goals of the moral life.

4.1 *The Cyclical Argument*

E. Taylor makes the following remarks on the first proof in *Phaedo*: “It is easy to see that reasoning is neither cogent nor, if it were, probative of what we want to see... the whole conception of the generation of opposite ‘out of opposite’ is vitiated by an ambiguity in the phrase ‘out of.’”¹⁷

If a thing becomes cold after being warmer one cannot assume that heat is the stuff out of which the cold is made. “In Aristotelian language, the thing which grows cool has lost the ‘form’ of ‘the hot’ and acquired the ‘form’ of the cold; the original ‘form’ has not itself been made into an ‘opposite’ form.”¹⁸ Taylor also finds that the assumption of the universal law of cyclic alternation is unwarranted.¹⁹

I. M. Crombie finds another defect in Plato’s argument – he turns a logical truism into a cosmological principle.²⁰

As Socrates states this argument it looks as if it rests on the truism that a thing cannot become P if it so already. This he expresses in the form ‘A larger (etc.) must come into being out of a smaller (etc.)... Thus a noise cannot become loud unless it was previously soft, but it does not follow from this that no loud noises happen except by development out of soft noises. But it is clear that Socrates uses his principle, as if it excluded all forms of becoming a P thing other than that of development out of an already existing but non-P thing.’²¹

Another problem that we encounter in the Cyclical argument is the concept of an *opposite*, which Plato leaves undefined and ambiguous. Yet, in *Phaedo* 70d7-e8, he illustrates

his arguments with pairs such as ‘beautiful’, and ‘ugly’; ‘just’ and ‘unjust’. These are *contrary* rather than *contradictory* opposites. They are not *exhaustive*. “They may not both be truthfully asserted of a given subject at the same time, but they may both be truthfully denied. With such pairs inferences cannot be made from the denial of one member to the affirmation of the other.”²²

R. Hackforth, in his commentary on *Phaedo*, focuses on the thesis of the continuance of life based on reverse processes (*Phaedo* 72a9-e1). “This argument can only have force on the assumption that there can be no new life, properly called, but only a periodical resumption of former life.”²³ But precisely on such an assumption Plato bases the whole hypothesis of the two-way pair processes.

Romano Guardini, in his book *The Death of Socrates* points out two dangerous conclusions of the present argument. The first is the nullifying of the historical. The existential density of man is denied as the superiority of the soul is eulogized. Thus, the body to which time and history are attached is denied its true value. The second danger is that of equalizing ‘spirit’ and ‘eternal being’. The “consciousness that the spiritual soul is indestructible is exaggerated into the assertion that it is uncreated.”²⁴

The Cyclical argument also falls short of its purpose. Even if taken as true, it fails to prove personal immortality. All that it shows is that the soul is indestructible. It cannot elucidate on the means by which the personal identity of Socrates, or that of any other man, is preserved through a series of rebirths. But this alone is what will satisfy man’s longing for immortality and justify his courage when faced with mortality of the body.

4.2 The Recollection Argument

The argument from Reminiscence seems to be the least unsound of Plato’s proof in the *Phaedo*. As Taylor claims, “This argument, if sound, brings us nearer to the conclusion we want since it goes to prove that the soul not only was ‘something’ but was fully intelligent before it had been conjoined with the body.”²⁵

For Norman Gulley, the principal weakness in this

argument lies in the fact that Plato “is apparently assuming that the fact that we attain a conceptual level of apprehension automatically affords a recollection of Forms, and thus implicitly assumes also the impossibility of false judgment.”²⁶

F.M. Cornford feels that the memory implied in the anamnesis doctrine is an impersonal one whose contents are common to all human beings.²⁷ He goes on to say that the “weak point in the argument is in the statement that we make such judgments, implying acquaintance with perfect equality as soon as we begin to use our senses; whereas in truth such judgments are highly reflective and not made by infants.”²⁸

Cornford’s point, however, is not fatal to Plato’s argument; for in our moral judgments at least we appear to have ideal standards not contributed by experience.²⁹ Besides at this juncture we may note that the Recollection argument points to the soul’s activity of transcending sensible experience and reaching the supra-sensible plane of abstraction.

There are some other difficulties too, if we say that the Form-Equal is a perfect exemplar to which the sensible experiences of equal things are only approximations.³⁰

In the first place from experience we often realize that we determine equality by comparing one log to another or to a common sensible object, such as a ruler. We never compare things to a non-sensible object. Secondly, all the sensible manifestations of equality are not equal to the form ‘Equality’. Therefore what is the characteristic of the form to make it a paradigm for things to be approximate to it?

The major drawback is that both the above criticisms consider ‘equality’ as an attribute of the form ‘Equality’ whereas Plato seemed to postulate an identity statement: ‘the Form Equal is Equal’. Hence, ‘sensible equals’ only participate. They are non-identical with it. (*Phaedo* 74b7-c8)³¹

4.3 *The Affinity Argument*

The argument of this section is to assure Cebes, who believes in the theory that the soul is blown away at death.

Plato says that the soul is “quite or very nearly indissoluble”. (*Phaedo* 80 b9) Thus he examines to which sphere the soul has resemblance. “The notion of likeness replaces the notion of membership of an order.” Hence Plato argues only for the approximate indissolubility of the soul.³²

One would criticize Plato for not refuting Cebes outright by saying that the soul is spiritual and does not belong to the material order. But, this method of Plato is dictated by the fact that Cebes is a materialist. He, therefore, first explains in an acceptable manner the concept of immateriality through forms and the soul.³³

Gallop raises the issue of the relationship between incompositeness and indestructibility:

Socrates here links (1) incompositeness with indestructibility...The supposition that incomposite things are indestructible has strong intuitive appeal... How an incomposite material thing could be destroyed is not easy to conceive... it is doubtful whether the principle that incompositeness entails indestructibility applies to material things. Simmias will... give an example of something immaterial - the attunement of a lyre - that is clearly destructible... In that case, the soul's incompositeness would not show its indestructibility.³⁴

Another difficulty is that *similarity* is not defined, and even if ‘being more similar’ means “having more features in common”, the argument would still be based on a weak analogy. Elements for a stronger argument would be invariability, incompositeness and indestructibility.³⁵

As Taylor observes, when comparing this proof with Christian mysticism, the “central thought in both cases is that man is born a creature of temporality and mutability... But, in virtue of the fact that there is a something ‘divine’ in him, he cannot but aspire to a good which is above time and mutability... In this sense, the morality of the Platonic dialogues... is from first to last ‘other-worldly’”.³⁶

4.4 The Objections of Simmias and Cebes; the Reply of Socrates

Both the objections, as we have discussed, before stem from two positions that are extreme: Epiphenomenalism and Mechanism. Though Socrates refuted his two adversaries conclusively (it appears so) one notices some lacunae, and one could also point out simpler and surer ways to refute the above two objections.

Regarding Cebes' objection we must note that he has inadvertently raised a very significant drawback of Socrates. In his arguments so far (in *Phaedo*) Socrates (and Plato) had not bridged the gap between the soul as 'that which thinks'; and the soul as 'that which animates and gives life to the body'. Thus, Cebes accepts the Recollection argument, but challenges the indestructibility of the soul.³⁷

Other critics feel that Simmias gave up a bit too easily in the face of Socrates' answer. He could have even held that an attunement might have existed before the particular body in which it inheres. Thus an attunement could exist even before the instrument that produces it. But we then realize that the consequences of such a view could be that many lyres could share the same attunement. Similarly many bodies should share the same soul. This would have destroyed the path to proving personal immortality.³⁸

Hackforth disputes Plato's stand in *Phaedo* 94a1-4. He feels that attunement (*harmonia*) is a term similar to purity. Just as we can have two pure specimens of water, we can have one purer than the other; and, similarly, we can have one attunement more in tune than another. This would entail understanding attunement in a non-absolute sense.³⁹

We may also explain the concept of attunement in 94a in a Platonic way. Different harps participate in attunement in different degrees. Hence there may be different ways of tuning a guitar, but ultimately all are attunements. Some sound more harmonious than others. There is also another very valid objection by Gallop, who, asserts that attunement and non-attunement are not *opposites* of each other. Hence, an attuned lyre can also admit non-attunement

to some extent.⁴⁰

Many doubts have been raised about the historical validity of the story of the development of Socratic thought - the gradual evolution from the scientific, mechanical view of reality to one where formal causality explains things.⁴¹ But, the validity of his doubts and the insufficiency of a mechanical explanation of reality are very well portrayed. Even the problems expressed in 96 c1 - 97 b8, which may seem trivial intend to make a serious point.⁴² Note that Socrates is not seeking a 'causal' explanation... but an account of the concepts 'larger' and more 'numerous'⁴³

The entire deductive method of hypothesis is quite acceptable; and, has wide scope, if used well. Thus, the reply of Socrates to Cebes, is very convincing. It serves as the point of departure for the last proof in the *Phaedo*.

4.5 The Argument from the Reality of Forms

Regarding this argument a critic has aptly observed: "The irony of fate has ordained that the proof prized most highly by its author should be the one in which an impartial critic finds the greatest weaknesses."⁴⁴ Many indeed are the fallacies that one finds in this final argument from the *Phaedo*. We will here consider only some of the more serious difficulties.

Hackforth objects that snow's refusal to admit cold is "a physical fact known through sense perception", whereas the corresponding truths about 'three' and the 'soul' are "statements about the implications of terms."⁴⁵ Thus what is invalid is the basing of the metaphysical conclusions on conceptual arguments and the derivation of existential propositions about the soul from its essential nature.⁴⁶

Regarding the principle of the exclusion of opposites we may notice a weakness, which "lies in the fact that it will seldom be the case that there is *one* and only form which 'brings up' one of a pair of opposites and refuses to admit the other. Fever is not the only thing which brings up sickness, nor fire the only thing which brings up heat."⁴⁷

Crombie notes another defect in the logic of Plato:

We shall see when we take a closer look at the argument that Plato has a fallacious answer to this way of disposing of his point. The fallacy is an easy one to fall into (it consists in treating the soul both as a property, which hence cannot lose its properties; and also as an individual).⁴⁸

Thus as a property the soul, as that which imparts life, cannot be deprived of it. The second consideration takes the soul as a conscious personality. We can speak of a 'dead' body since there is still the shape and weight to talk of; but in the case of the soul, if you subtract the activities there is nothing whatever. It would be the same as saying, that there can be no dead souls; as saying that "there cannot be an idle workman because workmen work and idlers do not."⁴⁹

A look at *Phaedo* 106d7 could be a cause for discouragement, because in "the end, the imperishability of the soul is accepted as consequence of the standing conviction of all Greek religion".⁵⁰ Hackforth observes that "it is only if we allow that the appeal is to faith that we can avoid a feeling of deep disappointment in this matter, in as much as from the standpoint of logic the argument has petered out into futility."⁵¹

Gallop, on the contrary feels that "the bathos of an appeal to religious faith at the climax of a philosophically sophisticated argument would only deepen the disappointment."⁵² Later, however, he concludes that this appeal to the divine would be Plato's way of assigning "a possible role for God and the Form of life." "In this role, God constitutes the cosmic 'reason' for which Socrates has searched."⁵³ (*cf. Phaedo* 99c6-8). This could be a sublime ending or a disappointing one depending on how one looks at the foregoing arguments. But in the context of Greek mysticism, it "is the soul's 'divinity' which is, in the last resort, the ground for the hope of immortality, and the divinity of the soul is a postulate of a reasonable faith which the dialogue never attempts to 'demonstrate'".⁵⁴

4.6 The Argument in the Republic

In keeping with his discussion on justice, Plato turns to discuss the immortality of the soul and how one must live in order to gain the greatest possible spiritual welfare.

Nicholas White feels that Plato's "far-from-cogent argument for the immortality of the soul rests on, among other things, the claim that injustice is the peculiar evil of the soul, in being that which, when it attaches itself to the soul, makes it bad."⁵⁵ This has not been argued for earlier, and is probably meant to rest on Plato's earlier argument about the importance of justice to the goodness of the soul, which is presented in *Republic* 433b1-e2.⁵⁶

Another weakness of this argument lies in Plato's claim that for each thing there is "one peculiar evil", which alone can destroy it. "Modern commentators have not failed to remark on the weakness of this argument, and indeed it is not easy to defend it." It is absurd, "since grain can obviously be destroyed otherwise than by mildew, and the human body otherwise than by disease"⁵⁷ Hence the proof is based on doubtful analogies.

One definite conclusion that is evident from Plato's proof is that the body and soul "are two distinct things (and not distinct aspects of one thing), and therefore it would be singular if the corruption of the one were to destroy the other directly".⁵⁸ This would appear to be a very clumsy arrangement in an otherwise rational and well-designed universe. This dualism makes evident Plato's idea that the soul's life on earth, united with the body, is a temporary and painful sojourn.

4.7 The Argument from Self-Movement in the *Phaedrus* and *Laws*⁵⁹

Regarding the *Phaedrus* argument of the soul as the principle of self-movement; which is repeated in the *Laws*; it appears that Plato has missed a point. "For all this argument shows, the individual soul might be an emanation from the World-Soul, to which it returns at bodily death." Yet, Plato was definitely seeking to prove personal immortality as may be evidenced from the *Phaedo* and other dialogues.⁶⁰ The *Phaedrus* argument would show the

soul as returning and dissolving into the World-Soul after the body dies.

The argument opens with the words: “All soul is immortal”. (*Phaedrus* 245c7) As it stands the argument looks more like one “for the existence and eternity of at least one underivative source of activity, than for the immortality of every soul.” Plato “fails in fact to bridge the gap between the concept of such an underivative source and the concept of a soul.”⁶¹

This inability to connect the soul and show its identity to the first principle renders inconclusive the proof of the *Phaedrus*. In the Tenth Book of the *Laws*, the “indestructibility of the soul is not explicitly asserted, but the conclusions of the *Phaedrus* argument are clearly implied”.⁶²

5. The Vindication of Immortality from the Spirituality of the Soul

After our criticism of the various arguments in the foregoing section it appears that none of Plato’s arguments would hold water in the face of objections, due to evident fallacies. What purpose then has this paper served? Is it just a futile exercise of intellectual curiosity? One area, which truly gives us hope in our study of Plato, is his doctrine of the soul. As Copleston puts it: “Plato in no way fell a victim to the crude psychology of the former Cosmological schools, in which the soul was reduced to air or fire or atoms: he was neither materialist nor epiphenomenalist, but an uncompromising spiritualist.”⁶³

5.1 Plato’s Idea of the Soul

What was Plato’s conception of the soul? For him, the soul was distinct from the body. It was man’s most precious possession and the “true tendance of the soul” had to be man’s chief concern.⁶⁴

Plato clearly envisaged the soul as something different from the body. In the *Laws* he asserted that “the soul is prior to body, body secondary and derivative, soul governing in the real order of things and body being subject to governance.”(*Laws* 896 c1-3) The

soul is indeed “utterly superior to the body”, and “gives each one of us his being”; the body on the contrary is “a shadow which keeps us company”. (*Laws* 959a7-b1)

Death is a separation of body from the soul (*cf. Phaedo* 64c4-8) and, “to know its true nature we must view it not marred by communion with the body.” When one considers it ‘purified’ by reason; it is found “to be a far more beautiful thing.” (*Republic* 611 b10-c6) The soul knows itself through self-reflection (*First Alcibiades* 133) Virtue is “a kind of health and beauty and good condition of the soul”. (*Republic* 444e1-2)

Through all this we realize that the “reality of the soul and its pre-eminence over the body finds emphatic expression in Plato’s psychological dualism, which corresponds to his metaphysical dualism.”⁶⁵ The soul transcends this world. It ascends to the intelligible region and contemplates the forms. (*cf. Republic* 517b3-6) In the *Timaeus* we hear that “the only being which can properly have mind is the invisible soul” (*Timaeus* 46d5-7). Besides being the cause of man’s intelligence, the soul is the principle of life; it brings life to the body it incarnates (*cf. Phaedo* 105c9-d4).

Besides the ‘transcendence’ of the soul, Plato insists throughout his dialogues on the ‘spirituality’ of the soul. We shall see how he strengthens his faith through the arguments we have discussed in the previous sections. This will then serve as our point of departure to show how Plato’s view of the soul as something divine and spiritual will be a base to build a proof for immortality.

5.2 The Spirituality of the Soul in Plato’s Proofs for Immortality

Spirituality may be understood as intrinsic independence of matter. It implies a certain immateriality. But does Plato ever speak of it? No, there is no evidence of the use of this word in Plato’s dialogues; but, as we soon shall see; he implies it in his arguments. He describes the activities of the soul and compares it to the divine, thus showing its spirituality and its immortality.

In the Recollection argument, the soul grasps the idea of *Absolute Equality* even as the senses present the finite and not-so-perfect equality of two logs. Thus, the soul transcends the material

and particular knowledge of the senses. It is able to view the entire spiritual realm- the *World of Ideas*. This knowledge of the supra-sensible and absolute reality is the means that Plato uses to assert the soul's immateriality.

In the Affinity argument the resemblance between the soul and spiritual, invariable and incomposite reality, is noted. When coupled with the body; the soul is drawn away "into the realm of the variable, and loses its way and becomes confused and dizzy, as though it were fuddled." But when it acts alone; "independent and free from interference", it remains in the realm of "the absolute, constant and invariable" (*Phaedo* 79c2-d7). The soul resembles the divine and rules the body (*cf. Phaedo* 80a-b).

The objections of Simmias and Cebes share a common factor as they downplay the spirituality of the soul. The former makes it a mere phenomenon of the body, and the latter considers it as something material. Simmias insists on the Pythagorean doctrine that the soul depends radically on the body. The soul is an adjustment of the tension between hot and cold and dry and wet. With a change in tension the soul is destroyed. (*cf. Phaedo* 86b4-d3) For Cebes, the Heraclitean viewpoint dominates his conception of the soul. Being is a material body with a finite energy, it will ultimately disintegrate.

In his refutation of these two adversaries Socrates affirms strongly the soul's immateriality. He shows Simmias how the soul acts independently of the body. There is no radical dependence of the former on the latter. In this way we see "that the soul works in just the opposite way. It directs all the elements...every form of control...as though it were separate and distinct from them." (*Phaedo* 94c9-d5) Cebes does not easily accept anything that is immaterial, hence, Socrates gradually leads him to the existence of the *World of Ideas*;⁶⁶ and, supplies the groundwork to show the soul too, is immaterial.

In the argument from the Reality of Forms, Plato proves first that since the soul is the principle of life it does not admit death. The soul could "either withdraw or cease to exist". (*Phaedo* 103d6-7) He bases his exclusion of the second possibility namely the annihilation of the soul; on the spirituality of the soul. The soul

because it is spiritual like 'God' and is "the form of life" (*Phaedo* 106d6) is imperishable and immortal.

The argument mentioned in the *Republic* makes a distinction between two types of evils. One attacks the body, the physical organism, while the other attacks the soul. The soul and body are thus separate and are considered as two distinct things. It would be in keeping with the Affinity argument then, that he associates the soul with the spiritual realm and the body with the material one.

The *Phaedrus* and *Laws* have a similar argument, as we have already observed. By associating through definition the soul with the underivative source of activity, Plato has nearly equated the soul of the individual with the World-Soul.⁶⁷ In this sense there is an exaggeration of the identity of the soul. Yet, we can pay greater attention to this insistent emphasis as an affirmation of the divinity of the soul.

We will now proceed by using the spirituality of the soul that Plato, has convincingly stressed, as a stepping stone to the vindication of the immortality of the soul.

5.3 From the Action of the Soul to its Nature

It may be best to begin by taking a look at Plato's doctrine of the *World of ideas*⁶⁸, which forms the basis of his thought. The *ideas* are the prototypes according to which the whole of reality (sensible) is created. They are supposed to be in 'another world', 'shining in pure light'. For Plato they have an objective existence. There are *ideas* for all living beings that are found in the universe. Though our finite experience shows us only this changing universe we can, yet, conceive of another perfect and unchanging universe. All the objects of our senses participate in the *World of ideas*. The objects of this world are also imitations of the *World of ideas*. The *ideas* are related among themselves and to one another. Thus for example the *idea* of bird, man and tiger all participate in the *idea* of animal and all *ideas* that we know (visible and invisible) participate in the supreme *Idea* and *Form*, that of the **Good**.

We shall vindicate the spirituality of the soul by examining

its activity. From the activity we shall realize its nature. Our line of argumentation will follow the Scholastic principle: “Action follows being.”

The Recollection argument shows us the spiritual activity of the soul. The soul helps the person to recollect and reminisce what was previously known. Thus, the soul gains an insight into the nature of the *World of ideas*. The Soul contemplates the *idea* of absolute equality. This participation in the *World of ideas* points to the spiritual activity of the soul.

In the *Republic* 508d7-9 we read that “when it (the soul) is firmly fixed on the domain where truth and reality shine resplendent it apprehends and knows them.” Thus, the soul does have spiritual activity. In the *Theaetetus* we find once more the idea that the soul needs no organ to view universals which she does by herself (*Theaetetus* 185e6-9). The *Philebus* 30 speaks of “wisdom and reason” being the soul’s monopoly. All these passages point to the spiritual activity of the soul.

From the Affinity argument we may draw a conclusion - the activities of the soul being immaterial; it is highly probable that the soul belongs to the immaterial order. This is reinforced with conviction by the Scholastic principle already quoted “The soul, has it a work which you couldn’t accomplish with anything else in the world...Is there anything else than soul to which you could rightly assign these and say that they were its peculiar work? Nothing else.” (*Republic* 353d3-8)

How can we move from the spirituality of the soul to its immortality? Spirituality means intrinsic independence from matter. Death we know can only affect the realm of matter. It is irrelevant in the immaterial world. Hence, the soul, which is immaterial, remains unaffected by death and is imperishable.

5.4 Summing Up

We have thus based a proof for immortality on a traditional principle with the firm basis that Plato supplies: *the spirituality of the soul*. Plato’s breath of vision encompasses the ‘other worldliness’ of the soul, which transcends man who “is born a

creature of temporality and mutability into a temporal and mutable environment.”⁶⁹

6. Conclusion

“Socrates was one of that small number of adventurers who, from time to time, have enlarged the horizon of the human spirit...Only by a rare stroke of fortune has one or another of these pioneers of thought found a single disciple who could grasp his meaning well enough to perform the task of handing it on.”⁷⁰ One such capable disciple is Plato. The greatness of Plato consists in the fact that he did not stop short at mere reproduction. He carried forward the spirit into new fields. One such field is that of the immortality of the soul.

Guardini pays the following tribute to Plato when he says:

The Socratic-Platonic philosophy is anything rather than a mere work of concepts, drawing its life only from the excitement of thought and knowledge; the man behind it is rich, strong, developed all round, and in touch with the most creative culture known to history...The expression of this is the doctrine of the philosopher's relation to death; the witness to it the figure and death of Socrates himself...It is this youth-strong will for truth, attacking the problems with such splendid organs of vision and thought, which makes Plato's works immortal.⁷¹

What truth can a philosopher take from such speculation? The answer is to be found in the words of Plato himself: “a man who has truly devoted his life to philosophy” is “confident of finding the greatest blessing in the next world when his life is finished.” (*Phaedo* 63e10-64a2) Therefore, “true philosophers make dying their profession, and that to them of all men death is least alarming.” (*Phaedo* 67e5-6)

Immortality gives man guarantee of heavenly and of his personal imperishability. Death is release and a parting of the soul from the body” It is not an end but a *new beginning*. “Plato has indeed left us the example of a way of philosophising and the

example of a life devoted to the pursuit of the true and the good.”⁷²

Notes

¹ Theodore Mainage, *Immortality: Essays on the Problem of Life after Death*, tr. J.M. Lellen (London: Herder, 1930) 1-2.

² All references to the Dialogues of Plato will be bracketed next to the quotation. The texts are from Edith Hamilton and Cairns Huntington, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato – Including the Letters* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978).

³ The tripartite nature of the soul is not considered here, being too vast to come under the scope of this paper.

⁴ David Gallop, *Plato: Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) 103.

⁵ R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedo* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1952) 3.

⁶ Alfred E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (London: Methuen, 1978) 184.

⁷ Gallop 13.

⁸ Taylor 187.

⁹ Gallop 134-135.

¹⁰ See Section 1.1

¹¹ Taylor, 189.

¹² Taylor 196.

¹³ Taylor 200.

¹⁴ Taylor 204.

¹⁵ Taylor 204-205.

¹⁶ I.M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrine: Volume I - Plato on Man and Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962) 325.

¹⁷ Taylor 185.

¹⁸ Taylor 185.

¹⁹ Taylor 185.

²⁰ Crombie 306.

²¹ Crombie 305-306.

²² Gallop 107.

²³ Hackforth 64.

²⁴ Romano Guardini, *The Death of Socrates: An Interpretation of the Platonic Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito and Phaedo*, tr. Basil

Wrighton (London: Sheed and Ward, 1948) 114-115.

²⁵ Taylor 186.

²⁶ Norman Gulley, [article in] *Classical Quarterly* (July-October 1954) 199ff., as cited in Hackforth 75.

²⁷ Francis M. Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952) 56.

²⁸ Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae* 51.

²⁹ Hackforth 76.

³⁰ The following passages are from Gallop 127-128.

³¹ Gallop 128.

³² Hackforth 85-86.

³³ Hackforth 86.

³⁴ Gallop 137.

³⁵ Gallop 140.

³⁶ Taylor 192.

³⁷ Crombie 316-317.

³⁸ Hackforth 118-119; Gallop 166-167.

³⁹ Hackforth 120.

⁴⁰ Gallop 164-165.

⁴¹ Taylor 199-200.

⁴² Gallop 173.

⁴³ Gallop 172.

⁴⁴ Theodore Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers: A History of Ancient Philosophy*, tr. G.G. Berry (London: John Murray, 1914) 3:44

⁴⁵ Hackforth 157.

⁴⁶ Gallop 200.

⁴⁷ Hackforth 161.

⁴⁸ Crombie 319.

⁴⁹ Crombie 319.

⁵⁰ Taylor 206.

⁵¹ Hackforth 164.

⁵² Gallop 220.

⁵³ Gallop 220-221.

⁵⁴ Taylor 206.

⁵⁵ Nicholas White, *A Companion to Plato's Republic* (Indiana: Hackett, 1979) 259.

⁵⁶ White 260.

⁵⁷ Hackforth 22.

⁵⁸ Crombie 152.

⁵⁹ See Section 1.7 and 1.8

⁶⁰ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Volume I: *Greece and Rome* (London: Search Press, 1976) 214.

⁶¹ Crombie 325-326.

⁶² Hackforth 23.

⁶³ Copleston 207.

⁶⁴ Copleston 207.

⁶⁵ Copleston 207.

⁶⁶ Hackforth 86.

⁶⁷ Copleston 214.

⁶⁸ A good presentation of the same is found in Copleston 163-206.

⁶⁹ Taylor 192.

⁷⁰ Francis M. Cornford, *Before and after Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968) 54-55.

⁷¹ Guardini 166.

⁷² Copleston 262.