

Plato's view on the souls



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Plato's ideas about the soul were revolutionary and extremely advanced for his time, as with most of Plato's philosophies, yet on the other hand they appear to be both self-conflicting and flawed. In this essay I will proceed to justify this statement.

Plato was a Greek philosopher with many views on life and existence. Plato's views on the mind-body distinction have been the target of many criticisms since his time. In the Republic, he formulated ideas on the allegory of the cave and the theory of the forms. He believed that our existence on earth was merely a shadow of a higher spiritual plane, our bodies just a vessel, or even looked upon as a cage trapping the soul and restricting it from this higher plain.^[1] Plato was a dualist and so believed that when the material body dies the soul lives on. He believed that we are dual creatures; the soul is distinct from the body and vice versa. The body has extension (it takes up space) and is impermanent: it has a beginning and will have an end. The soul takes up no space and is immortal: it pre-existed our body and will live forever. Plato does not really believe that the soul "lives" but that there is a part of existence that exists outside time. Plato's views, are best described in his analogy allegory of the cave in which it depicts a "prisoner" that escapes the cave – metaphorical for this life- and goes on to discover everything he once believed in was only a fraction of the truth: – Plato's main philosophy stemmed from the cave and was about knowing the theory of the forms. Here, he thought that the soul is immaterial and is immortal, however the body- being physical- could be doubted as it was part of the empirical world.

Plato believed that the soul was immortal; it was in existence before the body and it continues to exist when the body dies. Plato thought this to be

true because of his Theory of Forms. Plato thought we had such ideas as a 'perfect circle', not because we have seen one before or that it had been described to us, but the image was already known to us through the world of Forms. This theory also explained how the soul was generated; the soul already lived a life in the world of forms, a world that cannot be destroyed as the body can be destroyed. Once you die, the soul is free for a short time before being entrapped once again in another body.[2] Plato was also a rationalist. He believed that you only have true knowledge and understanding of reality through reason. The physical world is inferior, of course, to the realm of Forms. Any knowledge we have of the physical world is through our senses and is subjective and inexact.

Plato's idea of the soul is his dualist position, believing that body and soul are fundamentally distinct. His theory on the soul was produced in his book Phaedrus. In it Plato was most concerned with demonstrating the immortality of the soul and its ability to survive bodily death. He proposed the idea that, like Aristotle's idea of motion, whatever is the source of its own motion or animation must be immortal.[3] Plato was writing at a time in Greek philosophy where popular opinion believed that the soul did not survive death, and that it dispersed into nothing, like breath or smoke. Plato believed that the soul must be immortal by the very nature of being the source of its own animation, for it is only through a psyche that things can be living rather than dead. The souls are both animated and at the same time the source of its own animation. Plato also states that the soul is an intelligible and non-tangible article that cannot be destroyed or dispersed, much like his ideas

about forms of non-tangible realities; such as beauty or courage. In a more simplistic sense, the soul is a form and is outside time in that way.

The argument from affinity, as Plato posited in *Phaedrus*, states that because the soul is an invisible and intangible entity, as opposed to a complex and tangible body; the two must be distinct and separate. Plato believed that which is composite must be divisible, sensible and transient; and that which is simple must be invisible, indivisible and immutable.[4] Forms bear a resemblance to the simple, immutable entities, such as beauty; however a beautiful painting is transient and palpable. The body shows an affinity to the composite by nature of its mortality and mutability; just as the soul shows a similar affinity to immortality and indivisibility. To further emphasise the point, Plato writes "... when the soul investigates by itself it passes into the realm of what is pure, ever existing, immortal and unchanging, and being akin to this, it always stays with it whenever it is by itself and can do so; it ceases to stray and remains in the same state as it is in touch with things of the same kind" (*Phaedo*, 79c-d). He argues that just as the body's prime function is to understand the material and transient world, the functioning of the soul as an entity of rational and self-reflective thought demonstrates its affiliation with a simple and immutable world; showing that the two are distinct. However Plato does not explore the criticisms of this argument that just because an entity portrays an affiliation, does not necessarily require it to be as that which it affiliates.

Plato believed that the soul, if it were to be the animator of all living things, must be responsible for a person's mental or psychological activities and responses. For the soul cannot be the reason for life, yet at the same time

limited in its influence over the bodies in which it animates. However this provides one of the most serious and potentially defeating criticisms of Plato's views on the soul. He fails to address the issue of the interrelationship between body and soul, if they are indeed distinct. He doesn't mention if the soul act as controller of a lifeless body, or is there more to the body than simply the material. Moreover the argument from affiliation would suggest that the body is concerned with the material, composite world whilst the soul is concerned with the invisible and simple world. If this is the case then the soul cannot, following from Plato's argument, have any interaction with the material, bodily world; for then it ceases to be simple and immutable.

An argument from recollection, which Plato first put forward when discussing his theory of the world of the forms, also serves his theory of the soul.

Perfect forms, such as equality, are knowable a priori; we have no need for experience to tell us whether two lines are equal length. We must, therefore, know these things through recollection of these perfect forms. Therefore, the soul must have pre-existed the body to know these facts a priori.

Plato's argument from opposites was based on his idea that everything in the observable world has an opposite effect. As Plato writes in his work *Phaedo*; " If something smaller comes to be it will come from something larger before, which became smaller" (*Phaedo*, 270d). In other words everything we can know has an opposite; asleep and awake; hot and cold. Similarly they are reversible, just as one goes from a state of sleep to a state of being awake, one can do the opposite. Plato argued that if this were the case, then the same should apply to life and death. Just as one can go from life to death, one must be able to go from death to life; and if this statement

is correct, then the soul must survive this transition and as a consequence possess immortality and separation from the body. He believed that animation and life was integral to the very notion of the soul, just like heat is a part of fire; thus it cannot be destroyed and is eternal.

A separate argument from his theory of opposites was that of a similar theory of the forms and their opposites. He stated that no entity can consist of contradictory forms, and thus one form must necessarily exist and the other not in any particular entity. The number five cannot possess both the form of even and odd; by adding or subtracting one; the form of odd is displaced by even. Plato wrote: “ so fire as the cold approaches will either go away or be destroyed; it will never venture to admit coldness and remain what it was, fire and cold” The soul must share in the form of life, for we know that those living have a soul. Therefore, it cannot contain the form of death also, for this would be in direct conflict of life. The soul must ontologically necessarily exist, and must therefore be immortal.

Contemporary analysis of Plato’s views on the soul produces many criticisms; there is a clear chronological confusion as his work progresses; with the soul starting as an intelligible and non-tangible item, yet progressing to where the soul becomes a complex tripartite entity that is trapped in the material body, yet still longing to enter the world of the forms. Plato demonstrates a contradictory and muddled thought process that attempts to find resolutions for flaws in his thinking. The idea of an imperfect entity entering the perfect realm of the forms is one such logical fallacy in his argument; and he does this by seeking to find reason and justification for his conclusion, rather than seeking a conclusion based on all of his own logic.

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