

# Existence of the soul



## **Introduction**

There are a number of big philosophical questions that commonly interest philosophers. Chief among these questions is the existence of the soul. What will become of me when I die? Will I cease to exist or not? And if I do continue to exist will I remain in my current form or that of another life form? These are questions which are frequently discussed when talking about the soul. Plato's work on life after death is regarded as one of the very first pieces of written philosophical work on the existence of the soul. Plato's Phaedo is an attempt to answer these questions; an attempt to prove that the soul pre-exist the body and that it continues to live after death. Plato's Phaedo must therefore be discussed if a conclusion is to be reached on whether the soul pre-exist the body. Much of Plato's work, unlike many other philosophical writings, is in dialogue. Plato's dialogues are named after the central character, which in this case, is Phaedo. Besides Phaedo, other important characters in the dialogue are Echebrates with whom the dialogue begins with, Socrates who is the main character in the dialogue, Simmias of Thebes, a follower of the philosopher Pythagoras and Cebes whom also is a follower Pythagoras. Phaedo centres on the death of Socrates, who was sentenced to death in 399BC for corrupting the minds of the youth and denouncing the gods. After the trial, Socrates is in prison waiting to be condemned by drinking Hemlock and this is the point of Plato's Phaedo which begins to look at life after death. It is clear that the introductory section of the dialogue takes place from (60a) whereby Socrates after massaging his leg states that pleasure and pain are closely related, despite the fact they are opposites. The point Socrates makes here seems logical as empirical experience shows that people cannot appreciate the ups of life

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without having the downs. Socrates then goes on to claim that anyone wise will follow him to death, as a wise person or a philosopher long to be released from the body. This is an important point of Plato's dialogue as it ignites the discussion of the immortality of the soul. Why would Socrates claim that those who are wise should follow him to death shortly? For Socrates death is simply a release of the soul from the body. Socrates believes that " firstly he will be entering the company of good and wise gods and secondly he expects to enter the company of dead people that are better than those still alive, thus it is good to leave life" (Daniel Hill lecture notes, 2008). Furthermore the body for Socrates is a hindrance for a philosopher seeking the truth. The body's demands such as food, drink and sex are not the concerns of a true philosopher and more so the body cannot provide reliable information, our senses constantly deceive us. (A fine example...maybe example). The truth is the real nature of any given thing i. e. justice in itself, which has never been perceived by anybody. In order to reach the uncontaminated truth one must be pure and uncontaminated. Socrates goes as far to say " the philosopher's occupation consists precisely in the freeing and separation of the soul from body" (Daniel Hill lecture notes, 2008). However by arguing this point Socrates is presuming that life exist after death, something which provokes Cebes to raise an objection questioning Socrates line of thought by highlighting that it is widely accepted that " when one dies the soul may be released from the body and dispersed like smoke and so destroyed" Cebes challenge is one which Socrates must respond to and he does so by producing four arguments to support his claim that the soul is immortal. First is the Argument from Opposites which aims to show the cycle of death and rebirth must go on forever. Secondly is the

Theory of Recollection which aims to show that the reasoning part of the soul did exist before birth, thus making it plausible to hold that it will also exist after death. Third is the affinity argument, which concerns itself too with the reasoning part of the soul, in particular the nature of the Forms and the control of desires. The final argument Plato introduces considers the soul as the cause of life. The Argument of Recollection is what must be discussed in detail due to as stated above it concerns itself with the pre-existence of the soul.

### **Theory of Recollection**

The Theory of Recollection is introduced by Cebes, who briefly outlines the argument as follows: “ that all learning is just really recollection and that by recollecting it shows that we must have learned sometime before; which is impossible unless our souls existed somewhere before they entered this human shape. So it seems that the soul is immortal” (Daniel Hill Lecture Notes 2008). Simmias then asks Cebes to remind him how the proof of Socrates theory of learning as recollection goes and Cebes provides two reasons. Firstly Cebes puts forth that “ when people are asked questions, if the question is put in the right way they can answer everything correctly, which they could not possibly do unless they were in possession of knowledge” (Daniel Hill Lecture Notes 2008); and secondly “ if you confront people with a diagram or anything like that, the way in which they react provides the clearest proof that the theory is correct” (Daniel Hill Lecture Notes 2008). Cebes argument is very vague; however the point he seems to be trying to make can be understood by using a mathematical question. For example if you were asked, what is  $6+33$ ? You would give the answer of 39,

yet it is unlikely that you would have learnt that exact sum beforehand, so the fact that you recognised it shows that you must have learnt it in a previous life. Cebes answer for Simminas is allusive thus Plato introduces Socrates to give the argument in full detail. In Phaedo Socrates begins with the suggestion that one can only recollect what one has learnt at some previous point. Socrates too understands that recollection is the process of being reminded of something and uses the example of lovers “ who are reminded of the person they love, when they recognise a piece of clothing or any other private property owned by their lover” (Plato 2003). However to have prior knowledge of all things gained from experience within the world would be absurd, thus Plato outlines what he means is that we have knowledge of abstract entities or as Plato describes the knowledge of Forms. What does Plato mean by abstract entities or Forms? Plato means entities such as justice, beauty, goodness and holiness etc. The example he gives is equality. Plato writes in Phaedo “ We admit, I suppose, that there is such a thing as equality - not equality of stick to stick and stone to stone and so on, but something beyond all that and distinct from it - absolute equality” (Plato 2003). It seems what Plato’s argument is trying to show is that there is a concept of equality which is recollected when we view certain objects, such as two sticks of similar length or if we feel the weight of two stones of similar weight and we know whether or not they are of equal weight because we understand the concept of equality without it ever being taught. However what must be understood is that Plato is not saying that equality is within the sticks and stones themselves, as they may appear equal to me but unequal to another; but rather by seeing the sticks and the stones that we get the idea of absolute equality. Socrates then continues to highlight that we are

aware that sticks and stones do fall short of being equal, but to be conscious of the fact that they fall short means that we must have a the concept of what it is to be perfectly equal. However how do we know of this equality when Plato denies empirical knowledge as reliable? Socrates answers “ That we must have had some previous knowledge of equality before the time when we first realised” (Plato 2003). Therefore Socrates deduces that we obtained our knowledge of equality before birth. So if this holds true with equality then it must hold true with all other abstract entities or Forms such as beauty and justice. However Socrates continues claiming that “ Each of us loses this knowledge at the moment of birth, but afterwards by pertinent exercise of our senses, recover the knowledge which we once had before, I suppose that we call learning” (Plato 2003). Hence Socrates concludes that all learning is recollection. Socrates then moves on to present an alternative explanation to support his argument claiming that “ someone who truly knows a subject ought to be able to explain it to others, yet most people cannot explain the things that he (Socrates) has been explaining to Simmias” ([http://www. sparknotes. com/philosophy/phaedo/section5. rhtml](http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/phaedo/section5.rhtml)). Socrates explains that if someone can be brought to recollect knowledge of the kind he is explaining and then able to explain that knowledge to others, then it goes to show that knowledge existed in a past life and it was forgotten the at birth. Simmias raises an objection to this point stating that perhaps we gain knowledge at birth, but Socrates simply reminds him that if we possessed it at birth then surely it would be absurd to lose it at the exact same moment we gained that knowledge. Socrates then concludes that the “ existence of the soul before birth is as certain as the existence of beauty, goodness, and

all things in themselves that the soul supplies knowledge of when we see the physical things that approximate to them”

### **Plato's argument**

Plato's argument seems to be coherent and reaches a sound conclusion that the soul pre-exist birth. However the argument has been criticised by many philosophers due to the gaps within the argument. These gaps within Plato's argument must be explored in order to come to a conclusion on whether the Theory of Recollection does prove that the soul pre-exist the body. A chief criticism of Plato's theory of recollection stems from the foundation of his argument. Plato discusses two different kinds of knowledge; intrinsic knowledge of the Forms (goodness, beauty and equality etc.) and the recollection of knowledge, and this is where the problem lies. In Phaedo Socrates is intent on showing that what we know was present before birth. However Plato gives no explanation of when before birth we acquire this knowledge or how. Further, if we did come into this world knowing of abstract qualities such as justice, holiness and equality etc, the next thought would be that “ when did we first come into contact with these abstract qualities?”. Plato gives no time frame and this is important as it obvious that when we, as humans get to a certain age all of us tend to know similar concepts such as those of the Forms described by Socrates in Phaedo. Further, Plato maintains that no true knowledge can come about from experience and that knowledge is innate; therefore experience from a previous life could not have given us the knowledge of the Forms, such as equality, beauty and justice etc. On the other hand in Plato's defence that it could be said that our very first soul was created with such knowledge; that

is our first soul was created with the knowledge of Forms. However there are those that object to this line of view claiming that Plato does not provide an answer on “ how the cycle of birth and death of the soul begin? And if it has a beginning how can it end?” ([http://www. sparknotes. com/philosophy/phaedo/section5. rhtml](http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/phaedo/section5.html)). Owen Mcleod highlights this fact stating “ If the soul cannot die, then the soul is indestructible. The general principle being assumed here seems to be that if x cannot die, then x is indestructible. But.... If x is destructible, then x can die. This is clearly false. Inanimate objects of all sorts — rocks, shoes, corporations — can be destroyed, and hence are destructible, but they do not literally die upon destruction” More so is Plato’s meaning of equality. Plato advances equality not just as a relation to two objects but as a property in itself. “ Yet we wouldn’t normally think of a single stick on its own of being able to have the property of equality and so forth” Further Plato’s knowledge as discussed above is not that of future events or empirical knowledge but that of the knowledge of the Forms. Therefore for the Argument from Recollection to work the Theory of Forms must be accepted. This is as Hackforth states: “ the doctrine of Forms is with that of the soul’s existence before its incarnation: in other words, they stand and fall together. Attempts to prove the Theory of the Forms may succeed or fail, but what the significance here is that Platonised Socrates does not explicitly prove or justify the Theory of the Forms” Another problem of Plato’s argument is “ regarding the type of judgment that Recollection of the Forms leads us to make”. If as Plato states that everything we perceive in the world, including those sense perceived judgments; are sustained by the Forms, it would suggest that all human beings judgments are correct, as the Forms are pure truth. Yet this



conclusion would be widely inaccurate as human beings make many incorrect judgments, the ' Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster' is a testament to this as it was human errors which resulted in destroying the lives of thousands of people.

### **Conclusion**

Plato's Theory of Recollection is a coherent argument and one which attempts to prove that the soul does pre-exist the body. Plato Phaedo works on many grounds due to the fact that we as human beings can relate too much of what Plato has written. It is widely accepted that when humans look at an object we can be reminded of a particular person or event. Therefore it does not seem strange to think of abstract qualities such as equality in the same way. Nonetheless, the Theory of Recollection rest upon premises which once examined shows misgivings within the argument. Plato Argument from Recollection relies heavy on his Theory of Forms which he assumes are not doubtable and due to this the Theory of Recollection automatically proves the existence of the soul. Yet the Forms are susceptible to doubt, as discussed before if human's decisions are imbued by the Forms then surely the Forms are doubtable as human beings decisions are incorrect time after time. Further modern day philosophy has simply described Phaedo as " a religious doctrine supported by poets" (Hackforth 1992), suggesting that Phaedo may have proved the pre-existence of the soul in Ancient Greek, yet now in the modern era it is must be seen as no more than a religious doctrine which was widely accepted at the time. Against modern philosophy Plato's argument does not appear to be justified. " Karl Popper's ' falsification theory', for example, demands that any suggestion that is put

forward must be done so in terms that allows it to be falsified. If the idea requires certain assumptions that are impossible to prove, like the Theory of the Forms, then we cannot consider it as being valid” Yet the context in which the dialogue was written must be considered when evaluating the Theory of Recollection. Socrates is condemned to death and his final hours are upon him, it is clear that Socrates purpose in the dialogue is to explain his views on death to his friends. Socrates lack of concern in the face of death surprises Cebes and Simminas and this prompts Socrates to convey his views on the immortality of the soul. Furthermore the period the dialogue was written, it was universally accepted that life existed after death. Thus Plato task is to link life after death to life before death. Therefore a modern reader must bare this in mind when considering Plato’s Theory of Recollection. Thus after examining Plato’s Theory of Recollection it can be concluded that though the argument is coherent, key premises are subject to criticism which undermines Plato’s argument. Furthermore with development of modern philosophy and developments in science the Theory of Recollection is subject to further failings, thus to a modern reader it would be difficult to accept the Theory of Recollection as golden proof for the pre-existence of the soul, yet at the time Plato wrote Phaedo the argument would have been accepted by a great number of people.