

Socrates and the soul

Philosophy



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Socrates believed the most important task, in life, was to care for ones soul. Socrates argues that the soul is immortal and that we must rise above our physical nature in order to gain true knowledge. He believed the soul was our very essence, and our bodies the instrument utilized in dealing with the physical world. Socrates seemed confident that human beings survive physical death, therefore possessing an immortal soul. He felt a philosophers concern was not with the body but with the soul and the body played no part in the attainment of knowledge.

The body to him was an obstacle in the search for knowledge and there is a division between the body and soul. The soul being immortal and that wisdom and virtue come from the soul. Socrates proposes that after death the soul exists by itself, apart from the body, while the body, remains by itself, apart from the soul. In the Phaedo, Socrates' friends suggest that the soul will die along with the body. Socrates believes that the soul is immortal and if a person detaches himself from the physical pleasures of the world his soul may become free to follow the gods into Hades.

However, if the soul has indulged in the physical pleasures it will be riveted to the body and may not want to go join the gods in Hades and so the soul will remain here among the living. One of the most important parts of Socrates' theory explains that in order for the soul to leave the body you must separate yourself from the physical aspects in life, so that they won't compel you back to this world. This will ensure the soul will break away from the physical realm and join the gods in Hades. In death, Socrates was very confident that he would achieve this and in turn would join the gods when he drank the poison that ended his life. The soul explains Socrates, rules over the

body; however the body may deceive the soul through the senses. The soul may use these senses while dealing with things that are physical, but it should not always believe them. If the soul relies too heavily on the senses, then it may start to value the physical realm more than the knowledge that comes from the soul. However, men need to service the body in order to remain here on Earth and because of this the body may distort the needs of the soul to be that of the body.

Socrates differentiates the body and soul in terms of their respective desires; where they place their happiness. He felt that the body is the prison of the soul. " Because every pleasure and pain, as it were, another nail to rivet the soul to the body and weld them together". (Plato, Phaedo, 83d). The body's pleasures and pains make the soul believe that truth is what the body says. Socrates felt that the soul needs protection from the corruption of the body by practising such virtues as courage, temperance, and by thinking about incorporeal or ideal subjects.

However the body's voice always interrupts these pure contemplations with its own concerns: " feed me," " time to buy new clothes," " get me a drink," " let's make love," " I'm tired. " etc. He observes that the body's primary concerns are the pleasures of eating, drinking, and sex; whereas the soul sets its desires on attaining wisdom. Socrates implies that these two desires are in opposition of each other. This is why the soul of a philosopher must turn away from the body and its desires to set the soul free from its bodily desires in order to attain true knowledge.

The main arguments concerning the immortality of the soul come from the Phaedo. Socrates believed that when his body ceased to exist anymore, his

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soul would leave and join that of the gods where he would be eternally. He believed so strongly of this that he did not fear death but welcomed it. He believed that the soul is shackled with the body as if it were a prison so that thought is contaminated or compromised. Man is made up of Body and Soul, but the soul is corrupted by the material wants of the body and it then loses the ability to perform its true function.

What Socrates felt was to communicate with the divine. Socrates believed that the human soul was invisible, immortal, and the director of the physical body. He felt that Philosophy is a divine activity and as such must prepare the soul with wisdom for dying and death. The philosopher listens to the body's temptations as little as possible because the body complains that it lacks pleasure, but that fulfilment of pleasure always leads to more suffering so that the body again complains.

This is a continuous cycle and his belief was that a person should care for their soul first and foremost and that a person's soul was what made him/her who they really were. The soul was the whole centre of one's character it was the basis of thoughts, feelings, values, decisions and the state of the soul made a person either foolish or wise. By self examination and soul searching as well as ridding oneself of ignorance, he felt that like the body the soul would be kept healthy. Socrates believed that only when the soul separated from the body, is a person able to be truly enlightened and gain all knowledge.

This enlightenment has been Socrates' life long goal of discovering the truth. He recognized it as the separation of the two worlds as the spirit was freed from the corpse (body), and its material concerns so that specific thought

can finally apprehend the truth. He felt that “ the soul reasons best when none of the senses troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor any pleasure, but when it is most by itself, taking leave of the body and as far as possible having no contact or association with it in its search for reality”. (Phaedo 65c).

Socrates believed that in dying you learn complete knowledge because that is the time that your soul leaves your body and there are no more interferences. Even at the hour of his death he showed no hesitation and welcomed death, with no obstacles in his way this would be his ultimate pursuit of knowledge. Biography Plato, The Trail and Death of Socrates. Translated by G. M. A Grube. Third Edition. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. , 2000 Plato Phaedo. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. , 1977.