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CONCEPT OF IMMORTALITY IN PLATO'S PHAEDO

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Abstract. *Phaedo* is an important dialogue of Plato. The various aspects which it highlights include the arguments for the immortality of soul, theory of forms, and the Philosophy of death. Along with '*Republic*', other dialogues where he has discussed the topic of immortality include *Timaeus*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, and *Symposium*. Although Plato is not the first or the last one to shed light on this important philosophical issue but *Phaedo* occupies a central place on this topic in the history of thought. This paper focuses on the immortality of soul with special reference to Plato's *Phaedo*. The primary concern is to outline and analyse the related arguments as have been enlisted by Plato. Six arguments related to the concept of immortality have been discussed in this paper which include; the argument from the opposites, the argument from recollection, the argument from recycling, the argument from simplicity, the argument from nature of forms, and the argument from essential attributes.

Key Words: Plato, *Phaedo*, Epistemology, Soul, Dialogue, Pythagorean

Introduction

Phaedo is a depiction of the discussion that took place between Socrates and others on the day of his death. Although there is no certainty about the date of the Phaedo, but its tentative date of appearance is a little before 386 B.C.ⁱ It is the year in which Plato founded the Academy.ⁱⁱ It all happened soon after his visit from Sicily.ⁱⁱⁱ The scholars like Bostock have acknowledged the Pythagorean background of Phaedo.^{iv} Even the choice of important characters like Simmias and Cebes notify the Pythagorean setting.^v The three most important Pythagorean ideas were;^{vi}

- Belief in the immortality and reincarnation of the soul
- Belief that things are numbers^{vii}
- Belief that harmony is extremely important^{viii}

The other important figure in the background of this dialogue is that of Socrates.^{ix} His preoccupation with ethics along with its practical implications plays a major role in this dialogue. The theory of forms asserts nothing other than what Socrates is eager to define.^x The question ‘what is x?’ is cardinal to all the discussion. Moreover, this question is also directly related to looking after one’s soul.^{xi}

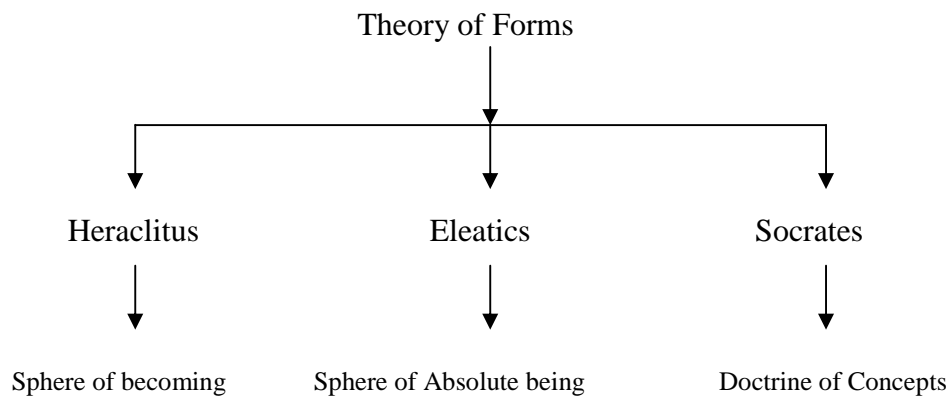
Scholars divide the dialogues of Plato into three distinct phases, namely,

- Early dialogues
- Middle dialogues
- Later dialogues

The early dialogues are called ‘elenctic’ because they remain inconclusive. Plato offers various arguments for and against a particular problem but the problem remains unsettled even then. Exceptions to this generalization include; the Meno and, the Gorgias.^{xii} On the other hand, the middle dialogues offer a positive theory about a problem. ‘The Phaedo’ is an example of the middle dialogues in which Plato is offering the two positive theories, namely, the immortality of the soul, and the theory of forms. Importantly, the positive theories which are established in the middle dialogues are usually not attributed to Socrates but they are supposed to be the achievement of Plato.^{xiii} Finally, the later dialogues represent the mature thought of Plato and include dialogues like *Sophist*, *Philebus*, *Parmenides*, and *Theaetetus* along with the book of his last days, i.e., ‘*The Laws*’. The place of *Timaeus* is disputed as according to some scholars it is the product of middle period, while some believe that it belongs to the later period.

Aristotle also mentions the background sources of Plato's theory of forms which are quite relevant here. According to him these sources include:^{xiv}

- Heraclitus
- Parmenides
- Socrates



Who is a True Philosopher?

Plato in his dialogues, *Phaedo* and *Symposium*, addresses the question “what the true philosopher should be?”^{xv} In *Gorgias*, he proves the supremacy of Philosophy over other occupations. The questions related to the nature and scope of Philosophy and Philosophers are extremely important for him. The same questions are cardinal to this dialogue as well. It is around the question ‘who is a true philosopher?’ that the whole discussion revolves. The virtues of a true philosopher are different from that of the ordinary man. The philosopher is different from the common man in that he is not plunged into the bodily pleasures. His criterion of pain and pleasure is different. He is not afraid of death mainly due to two reasons;^{xvi}

- It is the body that hampers the philosophical activity
- Investigation with the body leads to deception

Common people are more alive as compared to philosophers in the common sense of the word.^{xvii} It is the nearness to the death which is the distinguishing feature of the philosophers. Philosophy for Plato is the practice of death.^{xviii} Even the criterion of pleasure and pain is different for philosophers as compared to other men.^{xix}

Defining the ‘Death’ and the ‘Soul’

Two important words which will govern the whole discussion are; death and soul. If we look into the dialogue we see that Plato defines ‘death’ as “a freeing or separation of soul from body”.^{xx} ‘Soul’ is a conventional translation of the Greek word ‘Psyche’ which is a much more comprehensive word. Although it has many meanings, it is generally equated with life.^{xxi} It accounts for the activity associated with the living things. These activities include;^{xxii}

- Perception
- Desires
- Emotions
- Knowledge
- Beliefs
- Forms of consciousness

The claim for immortality of the soul amounts to dualism. It is a belief that somehow the soul is capable of existing independent of the body. This view stands in contrast to physicalism according to which there is no such thing as soul. So, the immortality of the soul is not a problem for the physicalist.

Arguments for the immortality of the Soul

To prove that the soul is immortal and is capable of existing even after death Plato offers different arguments. Of the various arguments offered in this dialogue only the last one is satisfactory for Plato. All the other dialogues are considered a preparation for the rest of the dialogues.^{xxiii} The arguments which Plato gives in Phaedo are the following;

- The argument from the opposites
- The argument from recollection

- The argument from recycling
- The argument from the simplicity/ affinity
- The argument from the nature of forms
- The argument from the essential attributes

All these arguments are discussed and analyzed critically in the coming lines.

The argument from the opposites

This argument is based upon the law of alternation and the law of compensation.^{xxiv} It makes use of the nature of the opposites. The argument goes like this;

P-1 The generation of a thing that has an opposite is from that opposite. (e.g. bigger was first smaller)

P-2 Two processes of generation are associated with all the opposites. (Increase and decrease accompany smaller and bigger)

C Living comes from dead. (Opposites)

There are problems with this argument which include the following; The necessity of generation from opposites is true only in the case of adjectives. This necessity does not follow for nouns.

All the examples which Plato has offered in this dialogue are of contradictions (smaller and bigger etc.) for which this argument holds but the conclusion which he draws from this is not related to contradictions. Life and death are contraries and this argument does not hold for them. In short, the premises are related to contradictories, while the conclusion drawn from them is related to the contraries. Bostock has discussed this objection along with the discussion of the nature of opposites in detail.^{xxv}

The argument from recollection

This argument is based on the assumption of the pre-existence of soul. It is further assumed that in that pre-existence the soul was accompanied by the 'Forms' and the soul possessed real knowledge before coming into this world. It should be kept in mind, however, that according to Plato true knowledge is the knowledge of 'Forms'. When it came in this world, the soul lost its true knowledge and got trapped in perceptions, opinion and imperfections. Nevertheless when it encounters

something that resembles 'Forms' it recollects its true knowledge (for example, in the case of mathematics).

To understand this whole process of recollection we can take an example. Consider a picture of a person whom you know. Whenever you will come in contact with that picture it will remind you of that person. You can only recognize the person in picture if you already know that person. For somebody who does not know that person that picture means nothing. This is the basic idea of recollection.

The argument from recollection proceeds like this;

P-1 All of us know things about forms. (Perfect roundness, Equality, Number 3 etc.)

We must have an acquaintance with perfection to have an idea of perfection.

P-2 Forms are not of/in this world.

This world is the world of imperfections. Nothing is perfect here.

C Soul is immortal (Pre-exists).

This argument raises some objections some of which are given below:

- Even if we are unaware of perfection in this world this does not leads to the conclusion that we should have that knowledge prior to coming in this world. We can extrapolate the perfection from the instances of imperfection.
- Even if we agree with this argument and conclude that the soul pre-existed, this does not entitle us to believe that soul is immortal. This was also the objection of Cebes and Simmias.

The argument from recycling

This argument is based upon an everyday analogy of things. We observe everyday that things are composed of parts. All the parts of a thing exist before that thing itself comes into existence as a result of assembling the parts. Likewise, even after that thing ceases to exist its parts (all/some) keep on existing afterwards as well. Take the example of a car. All the parts of car (engine, doors, steering, body, tyres etc) pre-exist the existence of car itself. When all the parts are assembled the car comes into existence. But even after the car is destroyed some parts of it keep on existing thereafter.

Plato applies this analogy to soul like this;

P-1 We are composed of a physical (body) and a non-physical (soul) substance.

P-2 Parts can survive even after something ceases to exist.

C Our soul can exist after death as well (as it is our part).

If we combine this conclusion with the conclusion of the argument from recollection it sounds agreeable. As according to the conclusion of the argument from recollection soul existed prior to our body. We can take it like this that soul (non-physical) part of us existed prior to our other parts. So maybe it is this part that will keep on existing afterwards as well. But still we can highlight few objections on this argument as well. These are;

- Our bodies are also made up of parts, i.e. atoms. Will they also survive after death?
- Why not we advocate the existence of all the parts in this case? What makes soul so special that we advocate the survival of this part (soul) only?

The argument from simplicity/ affinity

This argument is based upon the nature of objects that are prone to change and destruction. The invisibility of the soul as opposed to the visibility of the body is considered a qualification for the invariability of the soul. Furthermore, soul on the basis of this criterion is considered to be incomposite.^{xxvi} This incomposite nature of the soul is thus taken as a reason for its non-destruction.^{xxvii} The argument goes as follows:^{xxviii}

P-1 Only things that are composite are destructible.

P-2 Only changing things are composite.

P-3 Things that are invisible are immune to change and can't be destroyed.

P-4 Soul is invisible.

C-1 Soul can't nearly be destroyed. (Plato's conclusion; instead of can't be destroyed)

C-2 Soul is immortal.

This argument can be criticized in a number of ways. First of all, in the Phaedo itself, C-1 has been criticized by Cebes. His criticism is that even if a thing is nearly indestructible that does not prove its

immortality. This objection has not been treated in the dialogue by Plato. Still, this is a valid criticism.

Secondly, the most important concept on which the whole argument is based is the concept of invisibility. It has been treated in the dialogue as well. We need to see the different sense of the concept to see whether this argument can be based upon it or not. The first sense in which the word 'invisible' can be applied is the common usage of 'being unable to see a thing.' But this conception is unsatisfactory because even if we can't see a thing we can sense it by the help of our other senses. The counter example of harmony to reject this conception is presented in the *Phaedo*. Although we can't see harmony but we can still sense it. Moreover, we can say that although harmony is invisible in the common-sense use of the term it can be destroyed. So, if soul is a kind of 'harmony', it can't be immortal as harmony can be destroyed. Exactly the same objection is raised by Simmias in the *Phaedo* when he says that even the invisible things can be destroyed.

Another way in which this word can be considered is the inability to detect it. But here again we are in trouble because we can detect the soul on the basis of its effects. So, even in this sense the soul is not invisible. This argument, moreover, presupposes that the soul is immune to change. However as a matter of fact we observe different changes in our soul. We have different feelings at different times. Changes in soul keep on occurring from moment to moment.

The notion of simplicity is also playing an important role in this argument. The ideas that simples don't change and can't stop existing are false. Simples do change. We can have the example of a radioactive element, which though composed of a single element, keeps on decaying. Furthermore, simples can stop existing because they were at first brought into existence from non-existence. So, it is very much possible that they cease to exist once again.

Argument from essential properties

An essential property is a property which any given object must have as long as it exists. For example, to be hot is the essential property of fire. If it is not hot it could not be fire. On the other hand, we have contingent properties which an object can possibly have but even if it is not present the object can still exist. For example, the colour of any given object, i.e. car. This argument is based on the assumption that 'to

live' is an essential attribute of the soul. A soul cannot be a soul if it ceases to exist. The argument is as follows;

P-1 Life is an essential property of the soul.

P-2 Soul cannot die/ cannot be destroyed.

C Soul is immortal.

The problem with this argument is that we can have two possible interpretations of being 'deathless'. The first is that it is impossible that soul both exists and is dead. But in this case, it is very likely possible that logically speaking it does not exist and is dead. So we can say that soul can be destroyed and is not immortal. The second interpretation is a stronger one but the problem is that it does not follow from Plato's argument. According to this interpretation it is not possible that soul can be destroyed anyway.

Argument from the nature of forms

This argument is based on the epistemological pre-supposition that 'likes are known by the likes.' According to Plato, an eternal, non-physical entity of the sort which the soul is cannot be known through the changing and physical things. Our knowledge of the forms which are eternal and non-physical qualifies us to infer that the soul is also eternal and non-physical. This argument also pre-supposes the theory of recollection. The argument can be outlined as;

P-1 Forms/ ideas are eternal and non-physical.

P-2 An eternal and non-physical entity can only be grasped by the eternal and non-physical entity.

P-3 The soul (mind) can grasp the forms/ ideas.

C The soul is eternal and non-physical. (Immortal)

The baseline is that a thing which is impure cannot attain the pure. But we can offer counter-examples to criticize this argument. To know the cats, a biologist does not have to be a cat. Or to study the affairs of Canadians, a French person does not necessarily have to be a Canadian as well. Furthermore, to study the dead bodies, a doctor does not need to be dead at all. Contrarily he has to be alive. But these examples still do not falsify the P-2. We can still have the logical possibility that P-2 may hold for some particular cases (may be in the case of soul).

Conclusion

Plato's discussion of the nature of soul and its immortality is not limited to *Phaedo* alone. Apart from *Republic*, other dialogues that deal with the same theme include *Timaeus*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, and *Symposium*. Despite all these, *Phaedo* is the most important as it deals with the topic extensively. The same dialogue was the focus of our previous discussion. During the whole discussion various arguments which are present in *Phaedo* that deal particularly with the theme of the immortality of the soul have been delineated. Apart from mere outlining of the arguments, the arguments have been analyzed and criticized as well. Although the whole discussion points towards the unsatisfactory nature of the arguments owing to their inability to prove the point, they are an important part of the whole philosophical tradition. They offer multiple insights into the problem of immortality which is the very aim of any philosophical discussion.

End Notes

- ⁱ Plato, and R. S. Bluck. *Plato's Phaedo* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1955), 2.
ⁱⁱ Bluck. *Plato's Phaedo*, 2.
ⁱⁱⁱ Bostock, David. *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 4.
^{iv} Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 4.
^v Bluck. *Plato's Phaedo*, 6.
^{vi} Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 12.
^{vii} Stace, W. T. *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*. (London: Macmillan, 1920), 34.
^{viii} Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, 35.
^{ix} Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 5.
^x Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 6.
^{xi} Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 7.
^{xii} Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 9.
^{xiii} Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 10.
^{xiv} Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, 193 & 234.
^{xv} Bluck. *Plato's Phaedo*, 2.
^{xvi} Erich Segal, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 80-81.
^{xvii} Erich Segal, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 79.
^{xviii} Erich Segal, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 84.
^{xix} Erich Segal, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 79.
^{xx} Erich Segal, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 83.
^{xxi} Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 22.
^{xxii} Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 23-25.
^{xxiii} Bluck. *Plato's Phaedo*, 18.
^{xxiv} Bluck. *Plato's Phaedo*, 19.
^{xxv} Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 48-58.
^{xxvi} Bluck. *Plato's Phaedo*, 22.
^{xxvii} Kagan, Shelly. *Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 81.
^{xxviii} Kagan, *Death*, 82.

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