

**A CRITIQUE OF PLATO'S ARGUMENTS IN DEFENCE OF THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL IN THE PHAEDO (MARGINAL REFERENCE)**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper attempts a critique of Plato's arguments in defence of immortality of the soul in the Phaedo. It examines the cyclical argument and the argument from opposites, argument from knowledge as recollection and the argument from the Forms. It concludes that while Plato's argument on recollection defended an extreme version of rationalism which cannot be defended consistently, the argument from the Forms is shrouded with ambiguity and Plato fails to locate his position on reincarnation within the diverse views in the literature to support the cyclical argument and the argument from opposites.*

**KEYWORDS:** Plato, Defence, Immortality, Soul , Phaedo

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The view that human soul is capable of surviving death has its source, not only in philosophy but also in religion. (Mbiti 1975:119) The idea of transmigration of souls, the fulcrum of Pythagoras' contribution to philosophy relies on immortality of souls.(Copleston 1962:30)Cultural practices in Africa are sustained on the belief that human souls survive death.(Makinde 2007:148)This paper attempts a critique of Plato's arguments in defence of this view in the Phaedo. It examines Plato's cyclical argument and the argument from opposites, arguments in defence of knowledge as recollection and the argument on the Forms. It concluded that Plato's cyclical argument and the argument from opposites, although relies on reincarnation, fails to locate his views on the diverse positions on the issue while the argument from the Forms, as explained in Phaedo and some other Plato's dialogues is ambiguous.

### **Plato's arguments on the immortality of souls.**

The question of the immortality of the soul is a central theme in some of Plato's dialogues. In the Republic, arising from his essential destructibility thesis, Plato averred that human soul is immortal and indestructible. (Republic:608d).In the Meno, particularly from his view that knowledge is recollection, Plato also defended the position that human souls survive death.(Meno:81e).The focus of this paper is on the arguments he advanced in defence of immortality of the soul in the Phaedo. In what follows, I lay bare his arguments for this view. The need to argue in the defence of immortality of souls in Plato's Phaedo became expedient in view of the fact that Socrates was to die at sunset. In anticipation of his death, Socrates tried to convince his friends not to grieve on account of his death, since for him it is a transition to another world where the Philosopher is disentangled from the influences of the body which is an impediment in the acquisition of genuine knowledge. By way of introducing the arguments in defence of Plato's position on immortality of souls, Cebes, one of the people present challenged Socrates to justify his view that the soul is immortal since this is contrary to the majority's view on the subject. Cebes notes:"I think that after it has left the body it no longer

exists anywhere, but that it is destroyed and dissolved on the day that the man dies, as soon as it leaves the body; and that, on leaving it, it is dispersed like breath or smoke has flown away and gone and is no longer anything anywhere” (Phaedo:70a).

In response to Cebes request, Socrates introduced the cyclical argument by asking Cebes to recall a long standing theory which says that souls that came to the underworld, often come from this physical world, namely, children born in the terrestrial world are departed souls from the dead. He notes:”if that is true, that the living come back from the dead, then surely our souls must exist there, for they could not come back if they did not exist and this is a sufficient proof that these things are so if it truly appears that the living never come from any source than from the dead.”(Phaedo:70d)

To further demonstrate that the soul is immortal, Socrates introduced another argument. This is the argument from opposites. According to Socrates, things naturally come from their opposites, as a beautiful woman contrasts with an ugly one; a just case contrast with an unjust one, something considered to be larger comes from the one that is smaller and vice versa. It is Socrates contention that between opposites there are two processes. For instance between:”the larger and the smaller there is increase and decrease, and we call the one increasing and the other decreasing?”(Phaedo:71b)Socrates conclusion is that since the opposite of life is death, then the living must come from the dead. He notes:”then Cebes, living creatures and things come to be from the dead?”(Phaedo:71e)

The argument from knowledge as recollection was introduced in Plato’s defence for the immortality of the soul by Simmias another individual who had listened to Socrates position on the earlier arguments. Simmias interjected by stating that Socrates position that:”learning is no other than recollection”(Phaedo:72e)further demonstrates that the human soul is immortal. This was corroborated by Cebes, another individual who argues that the only proof to justify this view is the fact that when questions are asked from specific areas where individuals had no prior knowledge, they often respond to these questions correctly. This indicates that the human soul is immortal since without this, individuals would not have been familiar with things for which they had no prior knowledge. Socrates argues that saying that somebody remembers or recollects something implies that the person knew that which he remembers initially. In order to demonstrate that knowledge is by recollection, Socrates introduces a discussion on the subject of equality. In his view, our knowledge of the idea of equality derives from several equal things we have observed overtime even though equal things observed differs from Equality itself. He notes:”but it is definitely from equal things, though they are different from that Equal, that you have derived and grasped the knowledge of equality”(Phaedo:74c)For him, where an individual is able to recognize that one thing is similar or dissimilar to another, it counts as an instance of knowledge as recollection. He notes:”as long as the sight of one thing makes you think of another, whether it be similar or dissimilar, this must of necessity be recollection” (Phaedo:74d)According to him, we must admit that someone who observes that there is a difference between two things, namely, that which he has observed in time past is superior to the current one has prior knowledge of the former over the latter. In relation to the concept of equality, we can only say those things observed are equal or not because we have a prior knowledge of equality itself. Given that perception can only take place after birth, Socrates concludes that we have the idea of equality before birth.

In what appears to be an obdurate defence of immortality of the soul, Plato introduces the argument from the forms. This became necessary in the Phaedo where Plato attempts to establish his thesis that the soul not only exists before birth, which bolster his view on

knowledge as recollection, but also that the soul survives death, which strengthens his conclusion that it is immortal. The Forms must exist, Plato argues, for other perceptible things to exist. He notes:

“So this is our position, Simmias? He said. If those realities we are always talking about exist, the Beautiful and the Good and all that kind of reality, and we refer all the things we perceive to that reality, discovering that it existed before and is ours, and we compare these things with it, then, just as they exist, so our soul must exist before we are born. If these realities do not exist, then this argument is altogether futile” (Phaedo: 76e)

In response to this position, Simmias agrees that the forms and the souls must exist, although for him, argument about knowledge as recollection has only shown that the soul exist before birth, he doubts whether it succeeds in demonstrating that the soul is immortal. He argues that Cebes, point about the majority’s position on the soul, namely:”that when a man dies his soul is dispersed and this is the end of its existence” (Phaedo: 77b) seems to be true.

Cebes, who has also been involved in the discussion argues, that the argument so far has been able to show that the soul existed before birth, and another argument is needed to show that it is immortal. Against his audience, Socrates argues that the cyclical argument and the argument from opposites which they had examined conclusively demonstrated that the soul is immortal but agrees to elaborately discuss the argument. Relying on his audience’s assumption, with particular reference to the argument from the majority on the nature and the place of soul at death, Socrates introduces the second part of the argument which aims at showing that contrary to the majority’s view, the soul survives death.

The question Socrates asked borders on the kind of things that are susceptible to the position of the majority. He argues that only composites things are by their nature capable of being returned to different parts. Non composites things by their nature cannot be resolved into different parts. Things whose by their nature are unchanging belong to the class of non composites things while those whom by their nature are transitory belong to the class of composites thing. Plato argues that if the forms are unchanging while particular individual things changes:”the latter you could touch and see and perceive with other senses, but that always remain the same can be grasped only by the reasoning part of the mind?”(Phaedo: 79a) For Plato, it follows that there are the visible and the invisible. The visible changes, whereas the invisible is unchanging. It is also the case that between the body and the soul, the latter rules over the former. Given that the soul is divine and the body the mortal. He concludes that:

“Consider then, Cebes, whether it follows from all that has been said that the soul is most like the divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always in the same state as itself, whereas the body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble, and never consistently the same”(Phaedo:80b)

Having discussed three of Plato’s arguments in this paper, in the next section I attempt a critique of these arguments to show that they cannot establish the thesis defended by Plato on the nature and the ontological status of the soul at death, namely,that the soul is immortal.

### **A Critique of Plato’s arguments in defence of immortality of the soul in the Phaedo.**

The cyclical and the argument from opposites serve in Plato’s view to justify his idea of immortality of souls. Contrary to Plato’s view, I argue that the arguments are not sufficient to establish Plato’s conclusion on immortality of souls. The argument from opposites rests on the

assumption that there are opposites in nature. The opposite of a beautiful woman is an ugly woman; the opposite of a boy is a girl.etc. Plato argues that since the opposite of life is death, then the living must come from the dead. The cyclical argument rests on the assumption that if the living must necessarily come from the dead, it implies that their souls must exist there. The two arguments taken together in Plato's view established the conclusion that the soul is immortal.

Contrary to Plato's submission on this argument, I argue that Plato reached this conclusion by glossing over the facts of the reproductive system in his time on the one hand and the scientific account of reproduction after his time on the other hand. In other words, arising from the pre-socratic account of reproduction, particularly Thales' originative substance as water, a position confirmed by Aristotle that Thales adopted water because the seeds of plants and semen of animals contain a lot of water, (Copleston 1962:22) the argument cannot establish Plato's conclusion on the immortality of soul.

The argument I advance against Plato's view on the cyclical argument and its corollary, namely, the argument from opposites is bifurcated. It attempts to show that given the knowledge of the reproductive system which predates the era of Plato, the cyclical argument cannot justify his conclusion. The second part of my argument assumes that if Plato's theory takes into cognizance the modern development in human biology, where an adequate knowledge of the reproductive system in humans are available, his argument would still have been inconclusive, and as such fails to support the thesis he defended.

Central to the reproductive account in animals which Aristotle mentions in defence of Thales' position on the originative substance is the place of semen of animals. This also implies that the processes leading to the birth of a species of animal or human, particularly in human must involve a conscious procreative exercise, otherwise it would be superfluous to talk of the semen in human. One is led by this process of reasoning to conclude that the coming into being or the beginning of life in human cannot be justified on Plato's assumption that since the opposite of life is death; the living must come from the dead. Let us grant that an avowed defender of Plato may argue that Plato anticipates this objection. Let us suppose that he argues that Plato is aware that the beginning of life must involve a deliberate procreative exercise by human, but having satisfied this process, what we have is a cyclical process where the souls of the departed are reincarnated and as such justifies Plato's view on the immortality of the soul.

In response to this view, I argue that the development in human biology explicitly explained the beginning of life in human. This involves the process of fertilization. Fertilization has been defined as: "fertilization is the union of the two gametes (the egg and the sperm) and takes place in the fallopian tube or oviduct" (Henry Leese 1988:1) Let us grant that Plato is aware of the complex processes in fertilization as described in modern reproductive account, we may also grant that his position is that after these processes the babies that are born are reincarnated from the dead. There are reservations whether reincarnation suffices to justify Plato's conclusion. There seems to be no correlation between the modern account of reproduction and reincarnation. While the former explains the unique features of the offspring produced by their parents through the process of fertilization, the latter cannot explain, say, how the DNA of the newly babies can be explained along side of their parents. Apart from this, it is difficult to situate Plato's conception of reincarnation among the diverse positions on the issue. For instance, there is a view on reincarnation which can be described as a complete form of reincarnation. According to this view, "what we would normally label as reincarnation is the passing of the complete vital essence of a person from one body into another, without any

residue vital essence left behind in some sort of afterlife world”(Norman 2010:11)In his view, this does not exist anywhere in Africa. What exists in Africa is a partial form of reincarnation. This exists where:”only some of the characteristics of a deceased ancestor are reborn into one or more descendents”(Norman 2010:11)The major part of the dead person remains at the communal ancestral level until his memory is lost among his people. Apply to Plato’s idea of immortality of the souls which relies on reincarnation, it is doubtful whether the account makes any distinction between partial or complete reincarnation. There is no vestige of facts in Plato suggesting that such a distinction was made.

There is also the minimalist reincarnation hypothesis. Although this view was defended by Robert Almeder, Norman reports that he argues that there are certain important traits to human personalities which, though cannot be understood by reference to brain states, but survives them at death. This important traits are “certain memories and dispositional factor” which come into other human bodies during:”gestation period, at birth, or shortly after birth”(Norman 2010:174)The major contention of this account is that:”at least some human personalities reincarnate”(Norman:2010:174)

In defense of his position, namely, that human souls are immortal, Plato also relies on the argument that:”learning is no other than recollection”(Phaedo:72e.)Let us recall that the same argument was advanced in the Meno, another dialogue of Plato.(Meno:81e).The argument in both cases, is meant to conclusively demonstrate that human souls are immortal. The pertinent question is whether the argument succeeds in both cases to establish this conclusion. I argue that it is doubtful whether from the idea of knowledge as recollection, Plato’s position on immortality of souls can be established. Before drawing this conclusion, it is important to state that the view expressed in Plato’s Phaedo is borne out of his defence of extreme version of rationalism. The Platonic position is also a variant of a wholesale philosophical scepticism about empirical knowledge which in Hamlyn’s view cannot be defended without contradictions.(Hamlyn 1970:16) In other words, supposing Plato’s position is true, namely, that:”learning is no other than recollection”, it would not only imply that human souls are immortal, it also implies that genuine form of knowledge is only from the rationalist account.

Arising from all this, the conclusion I reach on Plato’s view on knowledge as recollection and its concomitant conclusion is that while Plato thought he defended a thorough going rationalist account of knowledge, his account suggests the contrary, as there are too obvious empiricists strands, which cannot be glossed over in his position. What are these empiricists strands? In a desperate bid to establish his conclusion on the immortality of souls, especially through the argument from knowledge as recollection, Plato defended a view akin to Hume’s position on the relation of cause and effect. Hume had on this relation argued that it rests solely on experience.(Hume 1965:324) Although this paper is not about Hume, the digression seems to be justified given the influence of Hume’s contribution not only in epistemology but also in metaphysics where the Platonic view on the immortality of the soul can be situated.

I argue that the argument rely on by Plato in his extreme defence of rationalism, with particular reference to immortality of the soul are tainted with empirical colorations, without which it cannot be advanced at all, let alone whether it succeeds or not. The first of such was the notion of similarity between two objects. Plato’s position was that as far as one can identify a similarity between two objects, whether the similarity is accurate or not, it is an instance of knowledge as recollection. This position he tries to demonstrate by introducing the concept of equality. It is from several observed instances of equal things that we come to the knowledge of equality itself. He notes:”but it is definitely from equal things, though they are different that

Equal, that you derived and grasped the knowledge of equality”(Phaedo:74c). In other words, the knowledge of equality as an ideal in Plato’s theory of forms could not be without having recourse to experience. To further emphasize the pivotal role of experience in Plato’s account, he notes:”as long as the sight of one thing makes you think of another, whether it be similar or dissimilar, this must of necessity be recollection” (Phaedo:74d) One will suppose that Plato as an extreme rationalist should pull the argument through its logical conclusion without having recourse to experience. It is amazing to note that in defence of the forms like Equality, he relapse to empiricist position to pull the argument through. He argues that individuals are acquainted with ideal like Equality through their experiences of equal things, since without this assumption from equal things, they cannot ascertain whether they are equal or not. He notes:”we must then possess knowledge of the Equal before that time when we first saw the equal objects and realized that all these objects strive to be like the Equal but are deficient in this”(Phaedo:75a2)

In what is a flagrant appeal to the senses, Plato argues that the knowledge of different instances of equal things can only be acquired through experience, namely through touching and seeing, which is only possible because of our prenatal experience of the ideal of Equality. Perception he observes can only take place after birth, suggesting that the knowledge of the ideal becomes known after birth. The Problem with this position is that Plato relies so much on empirical knowledge in order to establish his thesis on the immortality of the soul which is a rationalist position. The unavoidable consequence is that without having recourse to experience he would not have been able to defend his rationalist thesis. Besides, his argument glossed over certain fundamental epistemological problems of perception. It assumes that knowledge derives from perception are often accurate ignoring the fact that there are sometimes perceptual error; his argument suggests that our perceptual knowledge about instances of equal things on which the conclusion about the existence of Equality is drawn is devoid of error.

Plato’s argument on the Forms has been criticized by different scholars. I rely on Sedley’s assessment of Plato’s view with particular reference to the ontological status of the Forms. Plato recognized two levels of existence, sometimes refers to as the visible and the invisible world, or the world of forms and the world of appearance. As Sedley notes:”there are two worlds: the intelligible world populated by Forms and the sensible world, populated by sensible particulars”(Sedley 2016:11) In Sedley’s account, investigation into the nature of the Forms involves the intellect as opposed to the senses which are the vehicles of investigation in the visible world. It is only through our preoccupation with the intelligible world that we can have the knowledge of the forms such as Equality and Beauty which is exemplified by instances of equal and beautiful things.

The implication of this theory according to Sedley is that the Forms play a causal role in bringing forth the particulars. Sedley however maintains that there are reservations whether the “radical separation of the two worlds” can explain the causal role attributed to the Forms. He contends it is difficult given this separation to conclude that the Forms can actually cause the existence of the particulars. In his view, Plato ended up with an ambiguous description of the Forms and its relations to the particulars. He observed that in some occasions, Plato described the relationship between the Forms and particulars in terms of participation or sharing in the forms. Admitting that the Forms have to be shared to account for the existence of multiple things participating in it, the problem is that several interpretations could be read into the notion of participation. Sedley notes:”it tells us nothing about how a set of particulars come to be characterised by a Form, just that the somehow do”(Sedley 2016 :12) Sedley maintains that

there are indications from other dialogues of Plato like Parmenides that Plato agrees that participation is nothing but resemblance.

### **Conclusion.**

This paper examined Plato's arguments in defence of immortality of the soul. The cyclical argument and the argument from opposites, argument from knowledge as recollection and the argument from the Forms were examined. The paper concluded that while the cyclical argument and the argument from opposites rely on reincarnation, it appears that Plato's defence of immortality of the soul fails to situate his position among the diverse account of reincarnations in the literature. The argument from knowledge as recollection although a rationalist position relies heavily on empiricists strands for its success while the argument from the Forms is susceptible to myriads of interpretations.

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