

IMMORTALITY OF THE HUMAN SOUL IN PLATO'S METAPHYSICS: AN EVALUATION

BY

AGBO, CHRISTIAN O.

ABSTRACT

This paper is a brief survey and evaluation of the concept of immortality of the human soul in Plato's metaphysics. It makes no claim of having exhausted all that needs to be said on immortality of the soul. However, it attempts, in as comprehensive way as possible, to make clear the major arguments by Plato to support that there is an after-life. Plato's arguments shall be examined and evaluated here. Also, materialist antitheses to his arguments shall be examined to present a materialistic model that objects to Plato's arguments. The paper has attempted to hold that it is only when one lives dignified and honest life, that one will have immortality after death. With this notion in everybody's mind, the society will develop and move forward for the better.

INTRODUCTION

It is certainly true that some major philosophical schools and religious doctrines incorporate the doctrine of immortality of the soul. However, not all religious accept such a doctrine. Moreover, those that do accept the doctrine generally give no evidence of such an object. It was not thought necessary to provide evidence for

such an assumption. One might think, nevertheless, that such evidence exists. There have been numerous reports of the so-called out-of-body experiences in which a person is pronounced clinically dead by responsible medical authorities, but after a lapse of time, the person 'comes back to life'. These renewed persons have then described the period of time during which they were presumed

to be dead, and they have typically said that 'they' left or went out of their bodies. They said that they hovered above or near their bodies, that they could see and hear medical personnels and grieving friends and relatives; that they saw their former bodies on the bed, though they could not be seen nor heard nor communicated with in any manner, and they found this out-of body condition quite pleasant and did not want to return to their bodies. "This moment of 'return' would then correspond to the moment when the person is revived, much to the astonishment of all present",¹

Cases such as this provide evidence for dualism, because the entity that 'leaves' the body is conscious; it is aware of the people and objects in the room. It also has mental state independently of the body. Only an immortal soul can do such things. So, it seems as if we have had empirical evidence for dualism. Cases such as this seem to show that having a soul is essential for life itself. Furthermore, an out-of-body experience seems to support at least survival of the soul after bodily death. And personal survival of the soul after bodily death is an evidence for the immortality of the soul. Similar doctrine appears in the speech of Socrates:

*Love of truth, the love of
honour, and love of*

*sensual enjoyment are
not altogether distinct:
they are different
manifestations of the
same single energizing
force of desire within us.
Since they represent a
desire to obtain
something supposedly
'good', and possess it
forever, we may say that
this energizing force
within constitutes a
desire for some kind of
immortality.²*

Now, that which is mental can survive vicariously, whether it be by physical reproduction, in getting a child, or by physical generation, in the performance of noble act; and hence, we long to create, and to create in a medium of beauty, and in the pursuit of our aims, we may exhibit virtue of the ordinary men; they are only Lesser Mystries of Love. But for the philosopher, there are still Higher Mystries, which reveal that we can pass from love of one particular object to the love of universal object. Then we attain to true virtue and become "immortal if any man may be".³

Some religions such as Christianity and Islam teach that salvation comes only once and is eternal. Some other religions, notably Buddhism and Hinduism, teach that the soul lives after death of the body and is reborn in another body. According to W.H.





Capps, this cycle of rebirth continues till the person achieves a state of spiritual perfection, which is salvation. Buddhists call this state nirvana and Hindus call it moksha.⁴

Most Christian Churches teach that souls either suffer in hell or enjoy in heaven, according to their lives on earth. Many Christians believe that on the last day of the world, God will raise each person's body from dead and reunite it with its soul.⁵

In Igbo traditional society, the idea of immortality of the soul is a serious issue. This is more especially portrayed in their traditional burial rites. Madam Orie Nwa Odo said that the traditional Igbo man or woman does not accept to call somebody who has passed away "a dead man". Rather they say that the "dead man" "traveled", hence the dead person is called *onye gara ije* (he who has traveled).⁶

It is in view of the above believes, experiences and principles that this paper intends to use the concept of immortality of the human soul in Plato's metaphysics to establish that the soul really survives death. It is necessary to investigate Plato's views so that man knowing fully well that there is another place of abode after death, will begin to live a life which is near perfection. It is only when this kind of life is lived by all men that our society will

develop and more forward.

PLATO'S CONCEPTION OF THE SOUL

Historically, the first comprehensive idealist theory of the soul in the Western tradition was put forward by Plato. The Orphic-Pythagorean influence on him is most evident in his conception of the nature of the soul. He approached the subject from a purposive or functional angle. For him, the function of the soul is to control the body. The body does not operate on its own accord; as body, it is lifeless, therefore, its animation comes from something outside, which controls and directs it. That something is the soul. For him, the soul is incorporeal and consists of the intellect (reason) and the senses, the emotions and the will.⁷

The soul is something divine in man; it is immortal, immaterial or spiritual. It formerly existed without a body and will continue to exist after its separation from the body at death. But it will have to go through a series of re-incarnation until it is able to achieve final liberation or release. Then it will go back to the world of forms from where it came.

Plato also adds original element to his conception of the soul and that is the area he borrowed from Orphic-Pythagoreans. The soul according to him is made up of three parts,

namely, the rational part, the spirited part and the appetitive part. The rational part is the highest part of the soul; it is the part of the soul which is indestructible and immortal and which could control man. It is the part of the soul which distinguishes man from the animals. Its function is mainly to guide man and bring the other parts under control. The spirited part corresponds to man's lower emotions and sensual desires. Plato illustrates this tripartite nature of the soul with the image of a charioteer and two horses, one of which is interactable and very difficult to control, while the other is tamed and behaves properly. The charioteer is the rational part of the soul (reason). The tamed horse is the spirited part (the higher emotion), while the bad and interactable horse is the appetitive part (the lower emotions or sensual desires). It is the duty of the charioteers (reason) to direct the two horses (the higher and lower emotions) and bring them under control.⁸

With a number of arguments including logical and epistemological ones, Plato establishes that the soul is an immortal and incorporeal substance. Here are his arguments for immortality of the soul:

THE 'CYCLICAL' ARGUMENT

The cyclical argument can be summarized as follows; the term 'dead' implies that the object which is 'dead' has previously been 'living', and that there is a process from the state which we call 'living' to the state which we call 'dead'. Again, where a thing can pass from one state to the opposite, as from 'smaller' to 'larger', two processes occur. If a thing is smaller than what it was before, it must have passed into that state from the state of being 'larger'. But it never could have been larger without having gone through a similar process in the opposite direction. Hence, one might infer that there is a process opposite to the process of dying, and this will be a process from the state that one calls 'dead' to the state called 'living'; and this suggests that our souls must exist somewhere after our death, waiting to be born again.

This is confirmed by the consideration that if the reciprocal process of passing from the 'dead' to the 'living' did not take place, then sooner, or later, there would be no more births, for the 'stock' of souls would be exhausted. The principle here adduced may be called, the law of alteration and law of compensation.⁹

THE ARGUMENT FROM 'RECOLLECTION'

This argument generally

talks about the existence of souls before birth. In Plato's *Phaedo*, one of the characters there said that this implies the ante-natal existence of the soul. He said this based on Socratic notion of knowledge; that knowledge is a recollection.

Plato argued that the senses always receive only imperfect knowledge (opinions) from the external physical world. Therefore, our idea or knowledge of the "perfect" cannot come from the senses or the material world. Our knowledge must have been obtained prior to our birth in this world. That in which this perfect knowledge endures must transcend the material world.¹⁰

When Cebes doubted this argument from recollection and said that it did not prove the existence of the soul after death, Socrates replied;

*It has already been proved, Simmias and Cebes, if you will combine this argument with our earlier admission that all that is alive came into being from the dead. If our souls have previous existence, and when coming to the land of the living and being born must necessarily be generated from death and the state of deadness, surely, it must exist even after death, since it has got to be born again.*¹¹

ARGUMENT FROM 'AFFINITY'

The argument from affinity is briefly this: the body is visible, but the soul is invisible, and the soul is more likely to be akin to the class of things that are invisible and constant and composite. When soul considers changing phenomena, it is confused, but when it studies unchanging truth, then it is at peace and this again suggests kinship with what is invisible and everlasting.

The nature of the soul is to rule, while that of the body is to serve; it can thwart the cravings of the body if need be. There again, it shows superiority over things mortal, and likeness to that which is divine. Of the two components of man, the body seems to have affinity with the visible world of changing physical phenomena, while the soul has affinity with the invisible world of things unchanging and divine. Soul therefore, should be 'completely indissoluble, or anyhow nearly so'. We can hardly suppose that while even the body remains entirely for a considerable time after death, the soul must perish at once.¹²

THE SOUL IS IMMORTAL BECAUSE ITS OWN SPECIFIC FAULT, MORAL WICKEDNESS CANNOT DESTROY IT

Everything or almost everything has something that is particularly bad for it, so that

when it is infested by it, it eventually perishes. Such an 'evil' will be that which is essentially opposed to a thing's particular 'excellence'. One might instance ophthalmia, which takes away the power of seeing from the eyes, or rot which destroys timber. Nothing can be destroyed except by its own peculiar 'evil'. It would be unreasonable that it could be destroyed by the 'evil' proper to something else, and we should have to admit that it was indestructible.

Now, soul's special evil' is moral wickedness or vice. But moral evil will not destroy the soul in the same way in which disease can waste and destroy a body until it is no longer a body at all; and as nothing external to itself can destroy it, nothing other than its own peculiar 'evil', can be supposed to destroy it. We must therefore conclude that the soul is wholly indestructible.

ARGUMENT FROM MOTION

Another argument of Plato stems from motion. The universe, with all in it, is in some kind of motion. Motion is caused either by way of external inducement or compulsion, or internal inducement. The former is characteristic of non-living bodies; the later is characteristic of living bodies, which could be said to have souls in them. The soul is the principle of motion itself. It is that

which moves itself by itself by itself; the external unmoved mover, the beginning which is not and cannot be generated or destroyed.

As Plato argued:

But the beginning is ungenerated. For everything that is generated must be generated from a beginning, but the beginning is not generated from anything; for if the beginning were generated from anything, it would not be generated from a beginning. And since it is ungenerated, it must also be indestructible; for if the beginning were destroyed, it could never be generated from a beginning. Thus that which moves itself must be the beginning of motion. And this can neither be destroyed nor generated, otherwise all heavens and all generations must fall into ruin and stop and never again have any source of motion or origin.¹⁴

THE THEORY OF FORM PROVES THE SOUL INDESTRUCTIVE

A man can sometimes participate simultaneously of two opposite forms, for we can often predicate of him one quality in one respect and the opposite in another respect. Again, as we saw

when considering the 'cyclical' argument, it often happens that one state arises out of the opposite state. But the forms, and the sensible qualities that represent them (form-copies which exist in us), cannot themselves either be two opposite things at once, or turn into their opposites. Thus a man may be good in some respect and bad in others, then the Good in itself and the Bad in itself are still quite distinct, as is evidenced by the fact that no man can be good and bad in the same respect at one and the same time. If a man who is bad in a certain respect is to become good in the same respect, the 'bad in him' must first depart - it must either 'flee or give way' or 'perish'.

Furthermore, snow must be cold and cannot be hot as well in any respect. That is, heat is a contradictory of snow, and contradiction cannot be 'admitted' any more than contraries can. Infact, when snow is heated, it cannot admit heat and still remain snow; together with the elements of coldness that it contains, it must either 'withdraw' or 'perish'. Similarly, fire cannot partake of coldness as well as heat, because it is essentially hot. Now, we may apply the same principle to soul. Soul is essentially alive; hence cannot admit the opposite of life, namely death and at the approach of death, it must either 'withdraw or perish? In as much as it will not

'admit' death, we may call it 'deathless'.¹⁵

In all these, one can see that the soul is a substance and an incorporeal one. The soul as a source of motion and life is the opposite of death, and therefore, cannot be of the same substance as the body. Our apprehension of knowledge of reality does not depend on our corporeal nature or the material world. So, it must be the incorporeal nature in us which enables us to apprehend reality, which in itself, is incorporeal.

EVALUATION OF PLATO'S ARGUMENTS

In evaluating Plato's theory, one thing that readily comes to mind is an argument which can be posed against the 'cyclical argument.' In the argument, at best, there is only a 'prima facie' probability. Although we see a two-way process of generation taking place in many departments of nature, we cannot be sure that the law of alteration is universally true of the whole natural world. It is not impossible that the soul should follow a one-way course; and this conclusion is not invalidated by the law of compensation, for the stock of souls, for all we know, may one day come to an end. But the most serious consideration is that Plato has applied principles derived from the study of physical phenomena to an entity which is

hoped to prove immortality - and if it is immortal, there is no reason to suppose that it will conform to ordinary physical laws. It is possible that the stock of souls is infact, unlimited, or even that souls can be created out of nothing.

But the 'cyclical' argument should imply the antenatal existence of the soul as its existence after death. Socrates so insisted that the ante-natal existence of the soul must depend upon whether there are such things as forms.

Furthermore, Simmias, one of the characters in Plato's *Phaedo*, rejects the argument from 'affinity' by putting up an analogy thus; the attunement of a lyre is something invisible, beautiful, and divine, but nevertheless it comes to an end as soon as a string is snapped. For him, may be, this is what happens to the soul at death. At death, the soul may come to an end the way the attunement of a lyre comes to an end. To this end, Socrates rejects Simmias view of the nature of the soul, but he does not remove the force of the analogy as a possible objection to his affinity doctrine.

As regards the argument from motion, we have another of the generally accepted assumption of his age that Plato readily adopted, and anyone nowadays who believes that the universe was created by God

might reasonably quarrel with this assumption. Further, we are again required to regard soul as the vehicle of life; and although the myth that follows this passage is concerned with individual survival. For these, the argument is probably less satisfactory from one point of view as a proof of the immortality of the soul than as confirmatory evidence of the existence of God.

Plato further argues that notional beings exist and being ideal types (forms), they are the object of true knowledge and actually constitute true knowledge. He goes on to say that because these ideas do not come from the senses, they must have been acquired in the transcendental world prior to bodily existence and that which acquired them as the soul, which cannot then be of bodily nature. Granted that notional beings are ideal types, they nevertheless do not necessarily have to exist in reality, that is to say, outside the mind that conceives them. To assert that they so exist is a movement from the logical to the real order (order of real existence). This requires more than arguments used in establishing their existence and logical character as notional being.

Plato's argument for the existence of innate ideas is not convincing. This is because hardly anyone, if any at all, can

remember his or her previous existence. Therefore, even if one can say that the ideal forms are not given in sense experience and one can say this if one ignored wrongly, as Plato did, the fact that the mind is active and creative, and can idealize from sense experience one has to show that these innate ideas are acquired in previous existence, which Plato failed to do. As Flew argued, Plato drew the wrong conclusion; the fact that one remembers certain objects does not mean that such a person necessarily learnt such truth or came in contact with such object in the past. Plato's conclusion in this respect, that one must therefore be remembering because one had gained knowledge before one's conception is wrong. This evidence according to Flew, should lead us to say that we knew nothing and would have learnt nothing before our conception. Agbakoba quotes him as saying:

*The correct conclusion is: not that we must be remembering from a time before we were conceived, but that we were not available to acquire knowledge or anything else, before we existed at all.*¹⁶

Again, there is the problem of individuation and identity. If the soul is a different stuff from the

body and the soul is part of the transcendental reality which we perceive as ideal forms, we have the problem of how and why the soul is detached from the transcendental and individuated in the person. This closely associated with the problem of identity, which is concerned with how and why James' soul is different from John's since they come from or are of the same stuff. The fact that each person has a different soul stems from the fact that in Plato's conception, the person is identified with the soul, and there are different personalities manifested in different behaviours, among other things. This means that the soul in different personalities is different. Plato himself observes that there are bad souls in which the sensitive and the appetitive parts exert undue control or influence on the rational part.

Why then, and how does this individuation come about? If we say that the transcendental source of the soul instantiates itself in one individual as more perfect and in another as less perfect of its own accord, then the question would be, why does it behave in such a manner when it is in caprice and some kind of sadism and this would be a limitation on the perfection of the transcendental reality of the soul. Plato's theory thus cannot stand scrutiny, but it had a lot of

influence on theories in the idealist tradition especially during ancient and medieval times.

MATERIALIST ANTITHESIS TO PLATO'S ARGUMENTS

Lucretius, the Roman poet and philosopher, put forward a materialist Epicurean theory of the mind. His views being faithfully Epicurean were based on the atomic theory developed by Democritus and it was extremely materialistic for him, the mind is rather different from the soul. The mind is the understanding and it dwells in the body as the directing and governing principle of life. The mind is not the result of a certain vital state of the body known as "harmonia" as one could say of good health, for instance; rather like a hand or eye and it has location in the body. It is located in the middle region of the chest. And the reason for this is that it is here that we find the throb of fear and apprehension; the soothing of joy, etc.¹⁷

On the other hand, the soul which is of the same nature as the mind is disseminated all over the body; and it is this dispersed soul that enables us to feel sensation in the various parts of our body. It is also responsible for psychomatic bodily effects. The soul obeys and is moved by the mind.¹⁸

Lucretius argues that the soul and the mind must be of bodily nature in order control and influence the body, because this

has to be accomplished by way of "touching" (contact) and "touching" can only take place when there is bodily stuff. Furthermore, that the mind is a bodily stuff is seen in the fact that the mind is influenced by actions on the body. For example, grievous bodily harm or pain can cause a person to faint or lose consciousness. He went further to say that it is the size, shape, motion and arrangement of atoms that make them generate living things. The mind is made up of the finest of atoms. When a person dies, the fine atoms disperse, since the body, which hitherto held them together as a vessel holds water had disintegrated. The soul does not survive death. The dispersed atoms are part of nature and it is nature that begets new life out of lifeless matter, as could be seen in worms arising out of dungs.

Lucretius theory is obviously a completely a mechanistic conception of the origin, essence and structure of the mind. The weakness of Lucretius' early mechanistic conception could be seen readily in his view of the mind as something with a location in the chest region. This view appears as a logical development from the fact that for him, the mind is made up of atoms, though very fine atoms which occupy space. However, such a position runs against our

general philosophical understanding of the mind as something without any particular location in the body; no matter how closely one observes physical things (atoms inclusive) one is not likely to see a mental phenomenon. Then if a mental phenomenon is to have physical location, it would probably be in the brain/spinal cord, the centres of the physio-chemical activities of the nervous system: not in the chest area.

Furthermore, what goes on in the emergence of new life (worms from dung) is certainly not the transformation of inorganic, inanimate matter into organic, animate matter. Science has shown how eggs of insects hatch, showing larvae in such environment. Lucretius' error could be attributed to poor state of scientific knowledge at that time. However, the fact still remains that he, like mechanists up till now, have not adequately explained why and how inanimate matter turns into animate matter.¹⁹

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

One could see that the conceptions of the soul could be classified as either idealist or materialist. But here, more emphasis was laid on the idealist conception than on materialist conception. The idealist, Plato, approaches his definition of the

soul from a functional angle. For him, the function of the soul is to control the body. The soul is something divine in man. It is immortal, immaterial or spiritual. It formally existed without a body and will continue to exist after its separation from the body at death. Plato says that the soul is made up of three parts, namely the rational part, the spirited part and the appetitive part. He also developed many arguments for immortality of the soul. These arguments include: The cyclical argument, argument from recollection, argument from the theory of forms, argument from affinity, argument from the inherent nature of the soul and argument from motion.

In conclusion, there is no need denying Plato's idea of immortality because rationally, we can have an "if... then" kind of argument. If God exists, and if he is good, then immortality must necessarily exist. It is unthinkable that God would create purposive beings who dream dreams and have the capacity for limited growth, only to let all these come to nothing. Could a good God not make a provision for the fulfillment of these dreams and the actualization of this potential? The fact is that man barely begins to understand life and grow during his short lifetime. Most of us just begin to touch our dreams and solve some problems and it is

over. This would surely be an agonizing joke for a compassionate God to play on his children.

Therefore, there must exist an afterlife where man's self/essence can continue to grow. How great such a growth potential would be, especially if released from the impediment of the physical body, we can only imagine. Again, empirically, which may seem strange to some, there is evidence from séances during which contact is allegedly established with discarnate spirits.

Having established, to some extent, that the soul is immortal, the question that readily comes to mind is: How does one die? Apparently, how one dies is important while one is still alive. We want assurance that our death will be dignified; that conditions of termination will be surrounded with respect and honour; that it will not be degrading to ourselves or loved ones; that it will not be an unplanned messy kind of death. We want to feel sure that it will not result from ignominious causes; from cowardice, foolish anger, or stupidity. And certainly not least, we want the assurance that our last experience of consciousness will not be dominated by physical pain or emotional anguish.

There are two central questions involved in facing our own death: the question of what

we can leave behind and what we can take with us. It has been written that we must develop convictions and feelings about each of these questions if we are to face our own cessation with any sense of peace.

But some say that the better question is: What can I do with the days I have left to make my life really worthwhile? This last question is the one that should concern us more because it is only when one lives his days well that he will be able to guess the kind of life he will live when he dies. So, this calls for caution: that people should live honest and functional life.

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