

Immortality of the Soul in the First Half of *Phaedo*

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ABSTRACT

In the *Phaedo*, Plato presents what appears to be a dual conception of the soul's fate: purified souls ascend toward what is unchanging, while souls burdened by bodily attachment remain within cycles of reincarnation (80e-81a; 82c-84b; 114c-115a). Rather than treating these as metaphysically distinct destinies assigned to fixed types of individuals, this paper argues that the dialogue stages its arguments in a pedagogical progression that reframes how the soul's persistence ought to be understood and evaluated. The Cyclical, Recollection, and Affinity Arguments foreground different dimensions of the soul and are ordered methodically. The Cyclical Argument secures continuity at the level of life, responding to anxiety about extinction. The Recollection and

Affinity Arguments redirect attention toward the soul's rational orientation and its affinity with what is unchanging. Considered individually, the arguments may seem incomplete. Considered structurally, they trace a philosophical education – from concern about survival to reflection on the character and worth of that survival. The dialogue thus shifts the central question from whether the soul persists to what gives that persistence its value.

Keywords: Plato, *Phaedo*, Immortality of the soul, Pedagogical progression, Cyclical Argument, Recollection, Affinity Argument

1. INTRODUCTION

The immortality of the soul in Plato's *Phaedo* has long been regarded as the dialogue's central philosophical claim. Yet despite extensive commentary, disagreement persists concerning how the dialogue's arguments relate to one another and what conception of immortality they ultimately defend. The Cyclical Argument, the Recollection Argument, and the Affinity Argument each appear to establish the soul's persistence after death, but they do so by emphasizing different features of the soul. The interpretive challenge is therefore not only whether the soul survives death, but in what sense its survival is to be understood.

The prominent approach reads the arguments as components of a cumulative proof, culminating in the Final Argument. On this interpretation, the arguments form a progressive disclosure of the soul's nature. Each stage refines the conception established by the previous one, culminating in a metaphysical account from which immortality emerges as a logically necessary consequence. On this view, the earlier arguments function as preparatory steps toward the final clarification that the soul, as essentially life or as akin to the Forms, cannot admit death (e.g. Hackforth, 1972, p.16-19; Bluck, 2014; Gallop, 2002, p.103; Archer-Hind, 1883, p.14-15).¹ Though plausible, this reading overlooks a crucial dimension of the dialogue: Plato's strategic engagement with interlocutors whose prior conceptions of the soul differ in emphasis. The sequence of arguments does not simply deepen a single metaphysical thesis; it responds to distinct concerns and reorients existing assumptions about what immortality would mean under those differing conceptions. The progression is therefore not merely ontological but pedagogical.²

My reading interprets the progression in a different light. The Cyclical Argument presents the soul as a principle of life participating in cosmic alternation; the Recollection Argument foregrounds the soul's pre-existence and its relation to intelligible reality; the Affinity Argument emphasizes its kinship with what is invisible and stable. Yet these arguments are not ordered merely to establish indestructibility through increasingly refined ontological identification. Rather, they are pedagogically structured to engage different concerns and to reframe what immortality would mean under different conceptions of the soul. Taken together, they play a crucial role in illuminating what makes immortality truly valuable. The dialogue's progression thus shifts attention from the fact of survival to the question of its worth.

The dialogue does not address a philosophically neutral audience; it unfolds within a circle already shaped by differing emphases – some inclined to conceive the soul chiefly as a life-principle continuous through cycles of rebirth, others drawn to Socrates' insistence on rational purification and likeness to the intelligible. By beginning with the cyclical argument, the dialogue engages those whose primary concern is the continuity of life. By advancing to recollection and affinity, it gradually redirects attention toward the soul's rational nature and its highest activity. The sequence of arguments thus reorients the readers' understanding of what gives that persistence its ultimate significance.³

To avoid ambiguity, a brief terminology clarification is in order. By "life-principle" I refer to the soul insofar as it animates and sustains embodied existence. By "rational principle" I refer to the soul insofar as it engages in intellectual activity and seeks likeness to the Forms.⁴ "Immortality" may therefore signify

either continued existence as life-giver or a mode of being characterized by stability and intelligibility. The central claim of this paper is that the *Phaedo* deliberately brings these senses into relation through the ordered presentation of its arguments, thereby revealing both the structure of the soul and the philosophical education required to understand its destiny.

2. TWO FORMS OF DEATH

At the beginning of *Phaedo*, Plato presents a vivid death scene of Socrates' final moments, where his friends and family gather in his prison cell to bid him farewell. In this setting, Socrates challenges the conventional fear of death, claiming that "it is better for a man to be dead than alive" (62a4). His interlocutors react strongly to this idea, as they understand death merely as the cessation of life and the decay of the body – a terrifying and irreversible end. In response, Socrates redefines death through two crucial claims: (1) A philosopher practices nothing other than death and being dead (64a5), and (2) Being dead is just the separation of the soul from the body (64c5). By emphasizing the soul's independence from the body, Socrates suggests that death is not necessarily destructive but can be understood as a process that leads to an afterlife.

DEATH AS A TELEOLOGICAL FULFILLMENT

Socrates' first claim implies that death can be interpreted not simply a biological event, but also figuratively as a symbol for purification, accompanied by intellectual and spiritual achievement and freedom. If death were purely natural, it would not require

practice. Instead, Socrates suggests that death is something one can perform well or poorly, with success measured by the extent to which the soul has detached from bodily influences. True philosophers, he argues, have the correct conception of death and are eager to separate from their bodies in pursuit of pure knowledge (64a-b). This purification allows them to attain direct contact with the Forms, as Socrates asserts, "never will it be permissible for the impure to touch the pure" (67b2).⁵ Thus, for philosophers, death is teleological – it has a purpose: achieving knowledge and dwelling among the forms. Since bodily pleasures obstruct reasoning, true wisdom requires a gradual process of detachment (65b5). In this view, death is a final step in a lifelong purification, not a tragic loss but a fulfillment of the soul's ultimate goal.

DEATH AS THE END OF LIFE

At the same time, the dialogue presupposes another orientation already present within Socrates' circle. On this view, the soul is understood primarily as a principle of life that animates bodies and persists across cycles of incarnation. Socrates observes that "most men who are lovers of riches" (82c5) remain entangled in bodily desires, which makes it difficult for them to detach their souls from the physical world. Because they are unable to conceptualize death as teleological process, their souls remain impure and burdened by bodily attachments. Socrates calls them "lovers of the body" (69a), meaning they value sensory pleasures and bodily dispositions over the pursuit of knowledge. Consequently, their immortality is of an inferior kind – instead of escaping the cycle of rebirth, their souls are continuously drawn back in the physical world,

unable to dwell with the forms. From this perspective, death is not so much a culmination of rational purification as a transition within a larger cosmic process. What matters most is the continued animation and reanimation of embodied life. The fear associated with death, then, concerns not the annihilation of the soul in the strict sense, but the interruption or instability of this life-giving continuity.

These two orientations, I believe, reflect different emphases within a shared philosophical framework. The soul is both life-giving and capable of rational activity. What differs is which feature is treated as primary in determining its destiny. If its defining attribute is its role as the source of life, immortality appears as continued existence across successive embodiments. If its defining attribute is its kinship with what is intelligible and unchanging, immortality appears as purification and likeness to the Forms. Corresponding to these two emphases, there follow two different senses of immortality – one marked by the soul’s continued participation in cycles of embodied existence, and the other marked by the soul’s increasing separation from bodily influences and assimilation to what is unchanging.⁶ While both allow for the soul’s continued existence after death, they differ in what gives that existence value and structure. In the first case, immortality secures continuity; in the second, it secures transformation.

Some scholars argue that Socrates’ definition of death as the separation of the body and the soul is intended to downplay the seemingly dreadful nature of death. By presenting death as a departure rather than destruction, this definition presupposes the soul’s continued existence and function as a kind of euphemism that could ease common fears of death (e.g., Tarrant, 1952; Dilman, 1981). However, I believe this interpretation is misguided.

When Socrates introduces this definition, he presents it as a commonly accepted notion of death (64d). Yet fear persists even under this conception. The difficulty does not lie in misunderstanding death as annihilation, but in how one conceives the soul’s relation to the body and what one takes the soul’s proper function to be. On one hand, the separation itself can be terrifying if one understands the soul primarily in relation to embodied life. On the other hand, the same notion can be liberating if one understands it primarily in relation to rational purification.

3. THE CYCLICAL ARGUMENT: IMMORTALITY AS LIFE- CONTINUITY

In *Phaedo* (69e6-72e), Socrates presents the Cyclical Argument in response to concerns about the soul’s persistence after death, particularly those raised by Cebes. The argument is introduced to address Cebes’ fear that “it (the soul) may be dispersed like breath or smoke, or fly off and exist no longer anywhere at all” (70a1-5). Cebes’ weaver analogy – that even if the soul continues “weaving bodies” for itself, it might nevertheless eventually “blow apart and disperse” (77b5) – further reveals his conception of the primary function of the soul. His worry focuses primarily on whether the life-giving function of the soul can endure indefinitely. The anxiety concerns the eventual discontinuation of the soul’s ability to animate the body.

The weaver analogy makes this orientation clear. We do not fear the disappearance of the weaver out of concern for the craftsman as such, but because his disappearance would mean the end of the craft – the loss of the production and maintenance of the product.

Cebes represents an audience who conceives the soul primarily as necessary for sustaining bodily life – the product of the soul as the animator of body. In this sense, the persistence of the soul matters only insofar as it secures continuity of animation. The cyclical argument directly responds to this concern. Socrates argues that life and death are natural opposites that generate one another within a broader metaphysical balance (70e1-70e3). If living things were not regenerated from the dead, the world would eventually become static and lifeless (72b5). Just as waking arises from sleeping and sleeping from waking, so the living must arise from the dead and the dead from the living.⁷

A major difficulty with the cyclical argument is its reliance on the principle that opposites generate one another. Not all opposites reverse into each other: old does not become young, nor ripe unripe. As Greco (1996) notes, even if “living” and “being dead” are properties of the soul, it does not follow that the soul must return to life. The soul might persist in a state of non-living without cyclical regeneration. If life and death are linear rather than reciprocal, reincarnation becomes unnecessary. We can make better sense of the cyclical argument by appealing to Socrates’ earlier definition of death as “nothing more than the separation of the soul from the body” (64c5). This definition of death prescribes that death is not a linear process, as the process of separation and combination requires both ends of the spectrum – combination requires the reassembly of the dissembled components (Dorter, 1977). However, this less final and more benign understanding of death also implicitly presupposes the existence of a life-giving force independent of the body, meaning that souls must have existed before birth. As Gerson (2006) observes, defining death as

separation presupposes precisely what the argument aims to establish – that the soul is an independently existing principle. If the soul pre-exists and is essentially life-giving, then its postmortem survival is embedded in the premise. Given these difficulties, commentators such as Barnes (1978) argued that the cyclical argument is not meant to fully prove immortality (cf. Gallop 1982).

I contend that the Cyclical Argument is incomplete in proving the immortality of the soul. Nevertheless, the argument cannot be fully appreciated without considering its distinctive role within the dialogue. It directly addresses a specific fear expressed by Cebes: that the annihilation of the soul would entail the irreversible termination of lived experience. Given Cebes’ concern about the continuity of life, the argument clarifies what immortality must amount to if the soul is conceived primarily as a life-sustaining principle.⁸

If the soul is conceived as the life-principle, immortality, accordingly, would consist in the continued capacity to generate and regenerate embodied life. This, accompanied with the notion of death as the separation of the soul and body, warrants the necessity of the soul’s constant return to the earthly realm. In this sense, the Cyclical Argument specifies the necessary condition for a particular conception of immortality: life and death must be reciprocal processes, so that the chain of animation does not terminate. If this reciprocity fails, the very conception of the soul as life-giving force collapses. Seen in this way, the cyclical argument aims at establishing the metaphysical structure required for its possibility. It shows that if the soul’s identity lies in its power to animate, then return to embodied life is not accidental but necessary. In this sense, the Cyclical Argument does not presuppose what it aims to demonstrate; rather, it functions as

a hypothetical argument that discerns what must follow from the assumption that the soul's primary defining feature is its role as a life-principle – an assumption drawn from Cebes' concern. By contrast, if the soul is defined primarily through its rational activity and its aspiration toward what is unchanging, reincarnation ceases to be an attractive outcome. For such an orientation, immortality would not consist in continued animation, but in release: the separation of the soul from bodily entanglement to such an extent that it does not return. The dialogue's later development makes clear that these two conceptions of immortality diverge. The cyclical argument clarifies the first. The subsequent arguments will reorient the reader toward the second.

This contrast explains why Plato does not leave the cyclical argument standing on its own. Having clarified what immortality must entail under the life-principle conception, the dialogue immediately deepens the picture through the myth of reincarnation. The move from argumentative structure to mythic narrative is pedagogical. The cyclical reasoning establishes the conditions under which perpetual return is possible; the myth explores what such return amounts to in lived and ethical terms. By first securing the metaphysical necessity of recurrence and then depicting its consequences, Plato guides the reader to reflect on whether survival through return is, in fact, the soul's highest good.

FROM CYCLICAL PROOF TO PYTHAGOREAN RETURN

The pedagogical development draws upon a broader religious and philosophical background familiar to Plato's audience, namely the doctrine of palingenesis commonly as-

sociated with Pythagorean teaching. Ancient testimony, including Herodotus (*Histories* 2.123) and later reports preserved in Diogenes Laertius (*Lives* 8.14, 8.36), describes a belief in the transmigration of souls, that the soul survives bodily death and re-enters successive bodies within a larger cosmic order.⁹ In its traditional form, palingenesis secures continuity: survival consists in return.

Plato inherits this framework but does not simply reproduce it. In the *Phaedo*, reincarnation is no longer presented merely as a religious doctrine but is philosophically integrated into a broader metaphysical structure.¹⁰ The Cyclical Argument rationalizes rebirth by embedding it within a general principle of oppositional generation: if life and death are reciprocal states, the living must arise from the dead. Plato's reformulated myth of reincarnation, on the other hand, follows naturally from the Cyclical Argument and addresses the religious commitments of his interlocutors. It presents a philosophically shaped version of continued return that makes explicit what the persistence of life would amount to within a doctrinal framework they are familiar with. Given their knowledge of transmigration, life's continuity would take the form of successive re-embodiment.¹¹ At the same time, Plato subtly transforms the meaning of this continuity. Whereas traditional palingenesis emphasizes survival across embodiments, the *Phaedo* introduces an evaluative dimension. Rebirth is no longer neutral. It is connected to the condition and orientation of the soul. Even if the soul returns, a life as a donkey, wolf, hawk, or kite is not worth living (82a1-5).

At this point, it is important to clarify which aspects of life are primarily at stake for those who value the soul as the life-principle. Is the concern the preservation of individual personhood, or rather the continuation of

bodily dispositions and orientations? This distinction is crucial for understanding why someone like Cebes fears the soul's disappearance. Some interpreters, such as Robinson (1970, p.32-33), have questioned whether Platonic immortality preserves personal identity in a strong psychological sense, or whether what persists is a more impersonal rational principle.¹² Yet within the framework of the Cyclical Argument and the subsequent myth, the central concern need not be framed in terms of preserving personal identity in a robust psychological sense. The orientation toward bodily life that the dialogue depicts does not primarily seek the retention of reflective selfhood or explicit memory. Rather it seeks the continuation of the conditions under which bodily pleasures and dispositions may persist. Continuity appears tied less to explicit memory and more to the persistence of cultivated attachments. The soul carries forward its orientation, i.e., its desires, habits, and bodily inclinations, which determine the form of its next embodiment.¹³ What is preserved is not necessarily the narrative self, but the pattern of attachment that binds the soul to embodied life.

Socrates later describes how pleasure and pain "fasten" the soul to the body, "riveting" it and rendering it "corporeal" (83d-84a). Even after separation, the soul may remain marked by bodily influence (81b1-81b5). Although the precise sense in which the body renders the soul "corporeal" is unclear, the text makes evident that bodily attachments shape the soul's postmortem condition.¹⁴ Immortality, in this case, consists in prolonged persistence within the cycle of embodiment. The soul survives in a mode shaped by its attachments. Reincarnation is not merely continuation; it is the consequence of remaining orientation toward bodily life.

Under the conception of soul as the life-principle, what is valued is the preservation of life understood as the ongoing possibility of sensation and enjoyment. The soul's significance lies in its function as animator of the body – the carrier of bodily dispositions and desires. So long as the chain of animation continues, the fundamental concern is satisfied.¹⁵ On my reading, the Pythagorean doctrine of reincarnation functions as a necessary complement to the Cyclical Argument, given that death is understood as the separation of the composite and the non-composite. The soul does not return to its former body; rather, it may re-enter embodied existence in another form. In this way, the possibility of continued bodily experience, and the forms of enjoyment associated with it, is preserved. Souls attached to bodily desires return to forms corresponding to those cultivated desires (82a1- 82a5).¹⁶ Immortality understood as perpetual animation is therefore possible yet not necessarily desirable. To "remain for a very long time" without higher orientation resembles the preservation of an embalmed body: duration without fulfillment.¹⁷

The cyclical argument articulates what immortality must look like if the soul is primarily defined as life-sustaining principle. But the subsequent myth reveals the limitation of this conception. Survival bound to bodily attachment results in endless and purposeless returns rather than genuine liberation. The dialogue's movement is therefore pedagogical. It first clarifies the persistence required by a life-oriented conception of the soul. It then reframes that persistence as insufficient when measured against the soul's rational aspiration. Only after this groundwork is laid can the dialogue redirect attention toward purification and likeness to what is unchanging.

4. THE RECOLLECTION ARGUMENT

Socrates presents the recollection argument to demonstrate that the soul must have existed before birth. He argues that all learning is a form of recollection (76e5) and that in order for someone to be reminded of something, they must have had prior contact with it (73c1-3). Since we are reminded of the Forms when encounter their imperfect physical instances, it follows that we must have encountered the Forms before birth (74e1-75c2). Unlike the cyclical argument, which articulates the possibility of the continued animation, the recollection argument shifts our attention to the soul's epistemic nature. What it establishes is not merely that the soul survives, but that it has stood in relation to what is unchanging and intelligible prior to embodiment.

This shift acquires significance especially when viewed through the two conceptions of the soul already identified. If the soul is understood primarily as life-sustaining principle, the recollection theory may initially seem unsatisfying. It does not explain how life continues nor does it describe the mechanics of return – the primary concern of those obsessed with the preservation of bodily dispositions. Yet it does transform what that return could involve. If the soul has encountered the Forms before birth, then each reanimation carries forward a prior orientation. Survival is not the mere repetition of animation, but the continuation of a trajectory shaped by previous intellectual contact.

The type of intellectual engagement required for recollection appears to depend on the soul's condition. In the Affinity Argument, Socrates emphasizes that only what is pure can come into contact with what is pure (67b2), meaning that an impure soul – one

still attached to bodily elements or dispositions – cannot directly access the Forms. If this is true, then it seems that recollection is reserved exclusively to those who are philosophically enlightened.

Scott (2002) supports this interpretation, arguing that recollection is an intellectual activity aimed exclusively at forming philosophical concepts, and that it presupposes commitment to transcendent Forms. On this reading, recollection in its fullest sense belongs to the soul insofar as it is actively oriented toward the intelligible. In this respect, only those committed to the idea of Forms can recollect in the fullest sense.¹⁸ As Socrates remarks, when we observe that one stone is equal to another, we are led to grasp something beyond the stones themselves: the Form of Equality (74a10). This ability to discern the transcendent principle underlying particular instances is what characterizes successful recollection.

Yet the dialogue does not posit two different kinds of souls. As Socrates insists in response to the attunement argument, “no one soul is more or less a soul than another” (93d1). What differs is not the essence of the soul but its orientation and cultivated disposition. Other dialogues confirm this gradation. In the *Meno*, Socrates is shown to guide a slave to recollect geometrical knowledge.¹⁹ In the *Phaedrus*, recollection is described as occurring in varying degrees: “not every soul is easily reminded of the reality there by what it finds here – [especially] soul that got only a brief glance at the reality there, ..., they fell down here and they were twisted by bad company into lives of injustice that they forgot the sacred objects they had seen before” (*Phaedrus* 250a1-5).²⁰ If the only obstacle to learning through recollection is the wrong attitude toward the Forms, then the failure to recollect is not due to an essential difference

in soul but rather the impurity of recollection caused by bodily distractions.

Under this analysis, recollection reveals something crucial even for those not committed to a philosophical life. The soul that returns to embodiment does not return as empty animating force. It carries forward dispositions formed through prior contact with what is real. Attachment to bodily life obscures recollection while disciplined detachment clarifies it. The recurrence secured by the Cyclical Argument is therefore not ethically neutral. What persists across embodiments is not merely vitality, but orientation. When the soul is dragged down by bodily elements, it cannot “think most fully and minutely of each object of his inquiry, in itself” (65d5-66a5), and the body leaves it “no leisure of philosophy” (66d). In such a condition, one recognizes particular instances without pursuing their intelligible ground. Thus, one may display bravery “through fear and cowardice” (68d), grasping appearances without grasping the Form. The failure lies not in capacity but in direction.²¹

The Recollection Argument therefore does more than supplement the Cyclical Argument; it grounds the possibility of transformation within the cycle. If all souls share the same nature, and if recollection of the Forms is possible through ordinary cognitive activity, then no soul is fixed in its condition across successive lives. The capacity for recollection means that even within embodied existence the soul can redirect itself toward what is intelligible. Immortality is thus no longer mere continuation of animation, but the persistence of a being capable of reorientation. The same cycle of return may continue, yet the soul’s condition within that cycle can change according to how it engages its cognitive capacities. In this way, recollection introduces the

possibility of qualitative development within life-continuity and prepares the transition to the Affinity Argument’s explicit alignment of the soul with what is stable and divine.

5. THE AFFINITY ARGUMENT: IMMORTALITY AS ASSIMILATION

Simmias, in contrast to Cebes, articulates a different orientation toward the soul. Unlike Cebes, he does not fear death primarily as the discontinuation of embodied life. Simmias’ attunement theory (85e-86d), which compares the soul to the harmony of lyre, acknowledges that the soul could transcend particular bodily configurations and resemble the Forms, just as harmony can transcend the existence of any individual instrument. Simmias explicitly asks Socrates to address the concerns of those who consider “the soul to be a mixture of bodily elements and to be the first to perish in the process we call death” (86d), deliberately distancing himself from this viewpoint.

However, although Simmias clearly possesses this vision of the soul’s transcendent existence, the discussion is soon redirected by Cebes’ weaver analogy, which reflects precisely the view of the soul as tied to bodily elements through its emphasis on sustaining embodiment. The two analogies, i.e., Simmias’ harmony analogy and Cebes’ weaver analogy, though similar at first glance, are fundamentally different in terms of their conception of the soul’s role. While the goal and function of harmony are not defined or characterized by individual instruments, the goal and function of the weaver are closely tied to their product. It is clear that Simmias is more concerned with the inherent attributes of the soul as the rational principle – order and

measure – whereas Cebes is more concerned with the soul as the animator of bodies.²² On this note, Simmias represents a more distinct audience aligned with the Socratic-Platonic rationalist conception of the soul, one that treats its rational function as primary.

According to the Affinity Argument, the soul and body belong to two distinct categories of being. The body is visible, composite, and always changing, making it mortal and prone to decay (78c). The soul, by contrast, is invisible, non-composite, and divine, which makes it more naturally inclined toward permanence (79a). Socrates suggests that a philosopher recognizes this distinction and actively cultivates the soul's tendency to align with the Forms. The more a person pursues wisdom and detaches from bodily influences, their soul becomes "itself by itself", resembling the unchanging and pure nature of the Forms. As Socrates states, "whenever it has come to be alone by itself...when it is about those objects, it is always constant and unvarying" (79d7). However, this similarity to the Forms is not automatic. Unlike the Forms, which are eternally pure, the soul's condition depends on the tendencies it cultivates. If a soul is excessively attached to bodily pleasures and fails to pursue wisdom, it remains impure and fails to achieve true immortality.

However, the Affinity Argument seems to have a notable limitation. Socrates does not claim that the soul is identical to the divine and immutable. Instead, he cautiously states that the soul is similar to the Forms. This subtle distinction raises an important question: If the soul is only similar to the divine, does it necessarily share all its properties, including absolute immortality?²³ Apolloni (1996) highlights this problem, arguing that similarity does not entail identity. Just as biological twins may look alike but have different talents, the

soul may resemble the Forms in certain ways without being truly indestructible. This raises an additional question: Could a soul fail to achieve true immortality, despite its natural inclination toward it? Apolloni suggests that one way to strengthen the argument is to treat the visible and the invisible as exhaustive categories, such that sharing the central attributes of the invisible would be necessary for genuine likeness. Though this interpretation resolves the similarity vs. identity problem, it also faces serious challenges.²⁴

Given the difficulty, it is often argued that the Affinity Argument, together with the stronger Form-of-Life argument (Final Argument) later in the dialogue (105c-107a), may indicate that the Affinity Argument is provisional rather than a complete metaphysical proof (e.g., Sedley 2008; Frede 2008). I agree with those commentators who resist identifying the soul with the Forms and who judge the Affinity Argument insufficient as a proof of immortality. Yet the argument can be reinterpreted in a way that reveals its distinctive philosophical force: its distinctive pedagogical function within the dialogue. As the Cyclical Argument clarifies what immortality amounts to when the soul is understood as a life-principle, the Affinity Argument clarifies what immortality would require if the soul is conceived as essentially rational.²⁵

Socrates talks about visible souls as "some shadowy phantoms of souls have actually been seen" (81d1). These souls are impure because they are plagued by the body to participate in the "visible" (81d2-5). Whether the soul could be like the invisible depends on how successful a person could separate his soul from his body. Meanwhile, sometimes bodily elements could be similar to the invisible in some important respects. For instance,

Socrates suggests “those who’ve been embalmed in Egypt, remains almost entire for an immensely long time; and even should the body decay, some parts of it, bones and sinews and all such things, all still practically immortal (80c9-d1)”. The relationship of similarity emphasized here in the affinity argument shows us some interesting facts about the soul-body dichotomy. There is a sense in which the bodily elements could be immortal. The sense in which the lingering body persists, I believe, could be interpreted as similar to how a soul infused with bodily elements could persist.

The sense in which the soul is immortal in accordance with its nature must therefore differ radically from the endurance of a mummified body. For the soul to be immortal in the stronger sense envisioned here – that is, a soul that does not disperse after death regardless of the passage of time – it must share the central attributes of the Forms, since only the Forms are truly unchanging and immortal. The visible and the invisible are not fixed categories into which the soul is simply placed. The soul’s kinship with the invisible marks a potential rather than a completed status. To participate in the higher form of immortality, it must actively come to share the defining features of what is unchanging.

The Affinity Argument is directed toward those who share the Socratic-Platonic vision about the kind of immortality that is truly desirable – transcending the earthly realm in pursuit of knowledge of the Forms. This is why Socrates refrains from asserting that soul is identical to the Forms and instead emphasizes only similarity: the argument shows the direction in which the soul must orient itself if it is to attain genuine stability.

Towards the end of the Affinity Argument, Socrates hints at its deeper role:

“The soul of the philosopher would not think that while philosophy must free it, it should, while being freed, surrender itself to pleasures and pains and imprison itself again... The soul of the philosopher achieves a calm from such emotions; it follows reason and stays with it, contemplating the true and the divine... After such nurture there is no danger... that, on parting from the body, the soul would be scattered and dissipated and no longer be anything anywhere” (84a–c).

In this passage, Socrates makes clear that the philosopher’s true fear is not the soul’s dissolution as such, but its failure to free itself from bodily contamination. The issue is not mere survival, but whether the soul becomes akin to what is divine and unvarying. Within the Socratic-Platonic rationalist conception, death is not dreadful because it does not interrupt the soul’s commitment to reason and contemplation of the Forms. What would be dreadful, rather, is continued subjection to bodily desires. The value of immortality, on this view, lies not in persistence alone, but in the soul’s assimilation to the Forms through knowledge.

In contrast to the fear of separation rooted in the Pythagorean conception of the soul as the life-principle, those who share the Socratic-Platonic view fear the soul’s inseparability from the body – which is the source of ignorance. Since their fear does not arise from the dissipation of the soul *per se*, an argument that merely justifies the soul’s continued existence would not effectively soothe their fear. For them, the value of immortality lies in the acquisition of genuine knowledge, which requires establishing the possibility that the

soul is not a mixture of bodily elements – a view that Simmias explicitly requests Socrates to address (86e). On this interpretation, we need not assume that the soul is identical with the Forms or that it necessarily shares all of their central attributes. Rather, the Affinity Argument shows that, in order to attain the kind of stability that true philosophers desire, the soul must orient itself toward what is genuinely stable and unvarying. The soul can free itself from bodily contamination and engage in its highest activity precisely because of its inherent similarity to the Forms. Although the argument may not conclusively establish immortality as such, it is sufficient to soothe the fear of those who value the soul's rational function.

6. COMPLEMENTARITY OF LIFE AND RATIONALITY

The preceding analysis has traced two distinct but interrelated theses concerning the soul: its character as a life-principle and its character as a rational principle oriented toward what is unchanging.²⁶ The dialogue does not simply juxtapose these theses; it orders them pedagogically. The sequence of arguments in the *Phaedo* guides the reader from one conception of immortality to another, not by rejecting the former, but by deepening and reorienting it.

Seen together, these arguments articulate complementary dimensions of the soul. The soul as life-principle explains why living beings exist and persist. The soul as rational principle explains how the same nature can transcend mere persistence and orient itself toward what is unchanging. Taken together, they articulate not a simple guarantee of survival, but the possibility of transformation. That possibil-

ity grounds the significance of philosophical practice: once one recognizes what the soul's highest good consists in, philosophy appears not as an optional pursuit but as the appropriate discipline of the soul.

The pedagogical progression of the dialogue reflects this structure. Plato begins by addressing the most immediate fear – the anxiety that life might simply end. The Cyclical Argument articulates what immortality would mean if its value lay solely in the preservation of animation. The myth that follows then quietly tests that assumption: continuity alone does not ensure desirability. By first securing the prospect of return and then exposing its limitations, the dialogue gradually reshapes the reader's concern. The subsequent arguments do not merely add further "proofs." They redirect attention. The Recollection Argument grounds the possibility of knowledge by showing that the soul's engagement with the Forms is not accidental but rooted in its own cognitive capacities, exercised even through ordinary intellectual activity. The Affinity Argument then provides the ontological basis for this possibility: if the soul is akin to what is invisible and unchanging, its capacity for knowledge becomes intelligible, and its highest fulfillment lies in stabilizing itself in likeness to what it knows. In this way, the dialogue reframes the original anxiety. The question is no longer simply whether the soul survives, but what kind of survival is worth longing for. The argumentative sequence thus educates desire itself, guiding the reader from the fear of extinction toward an understanding of immortality that finds its meaning in philosophical transformation.

The dialogue's ultimate teaching is thus not that one conception replaces the other, but that the value of the soul must be understood in light of both.²⁷ If the soul is defined only as life-giver,

immortality collapses into perpetual return. If it is defined only as rational, the possibility of redirecting embodied life toward what is intelligible would lack experiential grounding. The *Phaedo* instead presents the transition from life-continuity to rational purification as achievable, and in doing so offers an ethical lesson: survival alone is not the highest good. What ultimately matters is how the soul understands and shapes its own persistence: whether it remains attached to repetition or turns toward what is unchanging. The pedagogical progression of the dialogue mirrors the philosophical education it seeks to enact. It begins with concern for survival and culminates in reflection on the soul's highest activity. By ordering the arguments in this way, Plato clarifies what gives immortality its true value and, in turn, why the philosophical life is worth pursuing.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Cf. Sedley, 2008. Even though Sedley didn't explicitly discuss how the cyclical argument, recollection argument, and the affinity argument establish the immortality of the soul, his interpretation of immortality in *Phaedo* as "essential immortality" suggests that its immortality lies in its essence as the *Form of life*.
- 2 I am more sympathetic to the view that the ultimate achievement of the *Phaedo* is not to demonstrate the soul's immortality, but to convey an ethical lesson concerning the highest good (e.g., Anton, 1968; cf. Hackforth, 1950; O'Brien, 1968; Baima & Paytas 2020, esp. p.104-106). However, the question of whether Plato attempts to and ultimately succeeds in proving immortality is highly complex and extends beyond the scope of this paper. I therefore do not attempt to adjudicate between competing interpretations on that issue. Instead, the primary aim of this paper is to illuminate a distinctive feature of the progression of the Cyclical, Recollection, and Affinity Arguments.
- 3 O'Brien (1984) insightfully argues that Plato's dialogues function as sophisticated literary vehicles, addressing different philosophical aims at different stages within a single dialogue and across different dialogues. On this view, the apparent silence regarding the immortality of the soul in *Diotima's* speech does not amount to a denial of immortality. Rather, the dialogue is deliberately structured to serve distinct purposes at different moments, engaging the reader and directing attention toward what is philosophically most relevant in each context. O'Brien further notes that the dramatic structure of *Diotima's* speech shifts the reader's attention from immortality as such to the value of immortality. I suggest that a comparable thematic reorientation also occurs in the first half of the *Phaedo*.
- 4 See also Gallop (2002, pp. 88-90), for the influential distinction in contemporary scholarship between the soul conceived as life-principle and the soul conceived as rational principle in Plato.
- 5 All translations of the *Phaedo* are adapted from Gallop (2002).
- 6 Fierro (2001) also clearly distinguishes two different kinds of immortality, suggesting that they differ in value.
- 7 Wolfe (1966) argues that Plato fails to distinguish between "being alive" (not yet dead) and "coming to life" (no longer dead), assuming that the former is equivalent to the latter. However, if "being alive" and "being dead" are taken as polar opposites, then "coming back to life" (72a) seems unable to capture the process of generation, since it appears to imply at least three states ($life_1$ –death– $life_2$). Robinson (1969) attributes this apparent error to an ambiguity in the Greek. This criticism is compelling if one assumes that the Cyclical Argument is intended to demonstrate the immortality of the individual soul. However, it is possible that Plato commits no such confusion. On my interpretation, the Cyclical Argument specifically addresses the concern about the discontinuity of life itself. Accordingly, "being alive" and "being dead" do not designate two individual states of particular organisms, but rather categorical stages within the larger life-death cycle of the cosmos. They function as polar conditions to which all living beings are subject. In this sense, "coming back to life again" refers precisely to the process of generation between these two cosmic poles: a living cosmos is sustained insofar as individual lives emerge again from death. Once the dialectical context is properly considered, the alleged ambiguity dissolves.
- 8 Ebrey (2023) holds a somewhat similar view, suggesting that the cyclical argument is based on an agreement that does not require Socrates to articulate anything about the nature of the soul.
- 9 On Pythagorean transmigration, see Burkert 1972, esp. p.120-165; Kahn 2001, p.19-32.
- 10 Dixsaut (1991) situates the *Phaedo* against the background of a marginal "Orphic-Pythagorean" current, understood as a syncretic religious-philosophical doctrine emphasizing purification, the soul's imprisonment in the body, and transmigration (cf. pp. 44 ff.). Although she acknowledges the methodological cautions raised by scholars such as Burkert regarding the delimitation of sources, she maintains that Plato draws upon this inherited framework in order to transform it philosophically. In her view, the *Phaedo* invokes tradition not to reproduce it, but to reconfigure its religious motifs within a reflective and dialectical structure (cf. p. 61).
- 11 Simmias and Cebes are often described in the Platonic tradition as associates or students of the Pythagorean philosopher Philolaus of Thebes, reflecting their engagement with doctrines of soul and transmigration characteristic of Pythagorean circles (e.g., Gallop 2002, p. 148). While some scholars question the strength of this association (e.g., Rowe 1991, p. 119), it remains clear that both interlocutors are familiar with doctrines of reincarnation commonly linked to Pythagorean teaching. It is therefore unsurprising that Socrates invokes this framework in addressing Cebes' concern about the extinction of life.
- 12 See also Rowe 1993, p.9-10.
- 13 See Broadie (2001) and Thein (2025, esp. p.75-76), who both resist a rigid substance dualist interpretation of the body-soul relationship in *Phaedo* and suggest that the soul's persistence includes the structured dispositions it has cultivated rather than a purely abstract rational essence. Cf. Bostock, 1986, 119; Ostfeld, 1987, p.28-29; Eggers, 1995. See also Pakaluk (2003) for an opposing view.
- 14 For a fuller discussion, see Obdrzalek, 2024.

- 15 This is particularly evident in Socrates' discussion of how most people conceive the nature of good and evil. They refrain from vices such as intemperance because they are "afraid of being deprived of further pleasures (Phd. 68d5)." This line of thought can be extended to their conception of death: death is regarded as evil insofar as it deprives one of future pleasures.
- 16 As Broadie (2001) has argued, Plato's dualism is not Cartesian but ethical and teleological: the soul's state reflects its orientation toward or away from bodily life. Cornelli (2015) further emphasizes the plasticity of the Platonic soul, capable of approximating either the corporeal or the intelligible depending on its attachments. See also Fierro, 2013.
- 17 As Long (2019, p.36) suggests, "the continuation of existence is not, in itself, a proper source of comfort; it is essential to show that the soul will somehow be benefited after death".
- 18 Franklin (2005) interprets recollection as a continuing ordinary learning process that underlies common cognition, with philosophical reflection representing its explicit theoretical articulation rather than a separate cognitive faculty.
- 19 For more discussion on how Socrates guides the slave to recollect through ordinary cognitive activities, see Huang, 2025.
- 20 Translation adapted from Nehamas and Woodruff, 1997.
- 21 Svavarsson (2009) identified a crucial feature of the recollection in terms of how it bridges the gap between sensory experiences and philosophical contemplations. In their view, it is the experience of difference between sensibles and the Forms themselves that initiate recollection and contemplation of the Forms.
- 22 Palmer (2021, ch.6) keenly observed Simmias' readiness to accept Socrates' proposition about the existence of Forms such as a Beautiful, a Good, and all other things such as these. Rowe (1993, p.116) also pointed out Simmias enthusiastically shares Socrates' belief about the existence of Forms. There is good reason to believe that Simmias is presented as a representative of a Socratic-Platonic audience.
- 23 See Elton 1997, p.313
- 24 It is a concern whether the text supports reading the visible and invisible as exhaustive ontological categories. At 79a–80b Socrates speaks in explicitly comparative terms, describing the soul as "more like" the invisible rather than categorically identical with it. (e.g., Rowe 1993, p.185; Trabattoni 2023, p.127; Gallop 2002, esp. p.141-142). See also footnote 12 and Cornelli (2019, p. 26-30) on a careful analysis.
- 25 Cf. Palmer, 2021.
- 26 See Robinson (1970, pp. 38-39) on Plato's attempt to combine arguments based on two different conceptions of the soul. However, I disagree that this reflects a mistake arising from an equivocation between the two notions. Rather, I suggest that it is a deliberate and ingenious attempt to reconcile them in order to convey an important ethical lesson.
- 27 This recalls the *Philebus* (20b-d; 21e-22c; 27b-31b; 59d-67b), where Plato argues that neither pleasure nor intellect alone suffices for the good life; the good life requires both.