

Focusing on the Soul

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In Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*, Socrates is about to be put to death and is attempting to console his friends by telling them that he is not afraid of dying and they shouldn't be afraid either. The reason that no one should be afraid of dying, he says, is that everyone's soul will still continue to exist in the underworld after death until it is again attached to a body. The argument that he uses to convince his friends is commonly called the cyclical argument. In this essay I intend to present the cyclical argument and the major argument that I have with it.¹

The cyclical argument is introduced when Socrates is directly addressing the question of whether or not “souls of men after death are or are not in the world below.”² This doctrine, he says, holds that souls go from this world, the world of the living, to the underworld where they wait until they can be born again into new bodies. Socrates says that this argument would be conclusive if there were evidence that the living are born from the dead.³ This evidence is the goal of the cyclical argument. For charity's sake I will grant the premise that there are souls and an underworld.

Socrates begins his argument by asking if it is not the case that all things that are opposites are generated from their opposites. His friends agree that it is the case that good things come from evil, just from unjust, and that something that grows greater in size must have started out as less and vice versa.⁴ Socrates and his friends conclude that this is the case with all opposites. They also conclude that there is

¹ I would like to thank Dee Poon and Irvin Sha for our discussions on this topic, especially those concerning the continuum argument.

² *Phaedo*, Trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://plato.evansville.edu/texts/jowett/phaedo3.htm>, 70c

³ *Ibid.*, 70c-d

⁴ *Ibid.*, 70e-71a

constant movement of things from one extreme to the other. There must be two processes constantly going on to keep things going from one opposite to the other. In the case of the opposites greater and less, these processes would be increase and diminution.⁵ There are lots of processes like these for each of the cyclical opposites. These processes are not always expressed in words, according to Socrates, but he does not provide any examples of processes that are not or cannot be expressed in words.

Now Socrates moves on to the idea of life and death being opposites and being generated from one another. He asks what the opposite of life is, “as sleep is the opposite of waking.”⁶ Death is the answer that he is given by his friends. Socrates says that life and death are similar to other opposites in their processes and in their cycle, in particular to the state of sleep being opposed to the state of waking, or wakefulness. He says that he will analyze the opposites sleeping and waking and find the intermediate processes, and he will let his audience analyze life and death as opposites. Out of sleeping, waking is generated, Socrates says, and out of waking sleeping is generated. The processes for the movement between these opposites are falling asleep and waking up.⁷ The fact that there are dead people means that there must have been living people at some time who have died. Since death and life are opposites, then in the same way souls that have been separated from the body require there to have been living people in order to exist (for the souls to have been separated from a body), living people require there to be souls that have been separated. Therefore, Socrates says, we can infer that there exists an underworld where the separated souls can be when not attached to living beings.

The group then decides that the processes by which the dead turn into the living and the living into the dead are 'dying' and 'revival'. Dying is a process that we

⁵ Ibid., 71b

⁶ Ibid., 71c

⁷ Ibid., 71c

can see, the movement of a living person's soul out of that person's body and presumably into the underworld. We cannot see the actual movement of the soul, but we can tell when it leaves the body by observing the body. Revival, then, must be the birth of the dead into the world of the living—souls moving from the underworld into human beings as they are born. Socrates says that this is another way in which we can get the inference that there is an underworld—if revival is the opposite of dying, then there must be somewhere for the souls of the dead to exist before they enter the babies.⁸

There are several attacks that one could make on the cyclical argument, but the argument that I will explain here focuses on the idea that opposite things come to be from opposites. If there must be a thing in order for the cycle from one opposite to the other to take place, as Socrates seems to say⁹, then it is difficult to see how the processes of change from life to death and vice versa work. When we say that something is larger, we are placing that thing on a qualitative size continuum. It can be compared to something else, and from this comparison we can derive an opposite. When a body dies, Socrates and his friends agree, the soul is separated from the body. The body decomposes, while the soul exists in the underworld. When revival takes place, the soul is “birth[ed]...into the world of the living,”¹⁰ into a body which becomes alive. The soul is not the thing that becomes alive, and the body that the soul is born into is not the same one that the soul was in before (that body is decomposed; this body is a new one). What, then, is the thing that can be compared on a continuum? What can we say is more living or more dead? It would seem that the soul is the only thing in this cycle that does not decompose, and it is not to the soul that we assign the attribute of being alive. Moreover, what is the continuum? One

⁸ Ibid., 71e-72a

⁹ Ibid., 70e-71a, see above discussion

¹⁰ Ibid., 72a

does not in fact say that things are 'more living' or 'more dead,' instead one refers to the property as a truth or a falsehood. It doesn't seem as though this is the type of opposites that Socrates was speaking about before.

In response to my claim that there is no thing to be placed on a continuum when discussing life and death, one could say that the soul is the thing that we actually refer to when we say that something is alive. A more proper term would be that the soul is 'bodied'. If Socrates were to shift his argument in this direction, if he were to treat the soul as the thing in the argument that we can assign attributes to, my claim would not stand. Without that shift, however, it seems that the argument that Socrates is making does not provide a thing to be placed on a continuum as is provided in each of his examples. Even with the shift, the second claim I have made would still apply—one couldn't easily make sense of the attribute 'more bodied' when applied to a soul.

In response to this second claim, the claim that there is no continuum in the opposition between life and death (or bodied and imbodied, for lack of a better word), some people could claim that there is a question of quantity when discussing truth values. Some people could say that something could be more true than something else—and in that case, one could also say that something could be more alive or more bodied than something else. A living thing would be more alive than a dead thing. The ensuing argument, while interesting, is outside the scope of this paper.

From my first claim alone, it would seem that in order for the cyclical argument to work as Socrates intended, in order for him to prove that souls exist in the underworld, he must recognize that the opposite thing that comes from opposites in the cycle of life and death (which would now be known as the cycle of bodied and

imbodied) must be the soul.