

## **The immortality proof in *Phaedo* 72a—77a**

(Pelletier)

I'm going to present a version of this proof. The version relies on six premises. I claim that four of them are explicitly stated by Plato, and that the other two seem “plausible enough” that he might just not have bothered stating them (they are “tacit”). After giving the six premises, I'll claim that three conclusions follow, two of which are what Plato wants to conclude and the third of which is something that he just did not notice, and probably wouldn't like.

I claim this main argument is valid, and so if we disagree with the conclusion we'll have to look at the premises to determine whether or not they are true. (That is, investigate its soundness)

Now, I also think that some of the premises are just plain plausible on their own, and that there are also arguments for two of the other premises...arguments suggested by things that Plato says. These arguments will have, as their conclusions, two of the premises of the main argument. One of these subsidiary arguments turns on a definition of “remembering”, and I will mention two different definitions that Plato gives. I will claim that only one of these definitions allows this subsidiary argument to go through.

After presenting these arguments, I will also mention a couple of things that are relevant to one of the other premises. (These have consequences not only for Plato's argument but also for modern treatments of concept-formation.)

### **The overall argument:**

1. If a knows y at (time) t, then a exists at t. [tacit]
2. If the soul of a could be reminded of x at t, then there is an earlier time t\* such that the soul of a knows x at t\*. [73c1]
3. There is a time between the (bodily) birth and (bodily) death of a such that the soul of a knows the Form Equality at that time. [74b2]
4. The soul of a doesn't know any Forms at the time of (bodily) birth. [76d2 and 76c2]
5. If the soul of a knows the Form Equality at t, then the soul of a can recognize things as being or not being equal at t. [tacit]
6. If the soul of a can recognize two things as either being or not being equal at t, then the soul of a could be reminded of the Form Equality at t. [74d4-76c]

Conclusion #1: The soul of a knows the Form Equality at some time before (bodily) birth.

Conclusion #2: The soul of a exists at some time before (bodily) birth.

Conclusion #3: There never was a time that the soul of a first acquired knowledge of the Form Equality.

### **An argument for premise 4:**

- 4a. To know x at t means to have acquired knowledge of x at some time before t and not to have lost it at t.
- 4b. To forget x means to have lost knowledge of x.

4c. There is no special time after birth (during one's life) when we forget all we know.  
 4d. If x knows y, then x is able to give an account of y.  
 4e. Not everyone is able to give an account of the Forms.  
 Therefore: 4f. If a were born with knowledge of Forms and didn't forget it, then a would be possessed with that knowledge throughout his life. [follows from 4a and 4b]  
 Therefore: 4g. If a were born with knowledge of Forms, a would be possessed with that knowledge always. [follows from 4c and 4f]  
 Therefore: 4h. If a were born with knowledge of Forms, a could always give an account of them [follows from 4d and 4g]  
 Therefore: 4. The soul of a doesn't know any Forms at the time of bodily birth [follows from 4e and 4h]

### **An argument for premise 6:**

6a. Equal things are not perfectly equal, but striving to be so; and the Form Equality is perfectly equal.  
 6b. If the soul of a can recognize the truth of [6a] at time t, then this recognition implies knowledge at t of what is being striven toward (i.e., the Form Equality).  
 6c. One cannot recognize that x is (or isn't) a perfect instance of y unless one already knows what y is.  
 Therefore: 6d. If the soul of a can recognize two things as being (or not being) equal at t, then the soul of a has knowledge at t of the Form Equality [follows from 6a and 6b]  
 Therefore: 6e. If the soul of a can recognize two things as being (or not being) equal at t, then the soul of a already knows what the Form Equality is at t [follows from 6c and 6d]  
 Therefore: 6. If the soul of a can recognize two things as being (or not being) equal at t, then the soul of a could be reminded of the Form Equality at t. [follows from 6e and the definition of 'memory']

### **Two definitions of "remembering":**

1. So long as the sight of one thing leads you to conceive of another, a case of reminder must have occurred [74c11-d2]
2. By directing senses to the relevant object, we recover old knowledge [75e]

### **An issue with concept formation:**

Plato uses the example of "recognizing/knowing the Form Equality". But we might equally put the problem in terms of "having the concept of equality". And we could use *any* concept, not just the equality concept.

The problem is a kind of tension between Plato's premise 5 and his premise 6. Put in terms of concept-possession, premise 5 says:

5\*. If one has the concept of equality at  $t$ , then s/he can recognize things as equal or not equal at  $t$ .

But this conflicts with the train of thought mentioned in 6a—6e (especially 6c), which presumes

\*\* No one can simultaneously recognize things as being or not being equal and at the same time first acquire the concept of equality.

This principle is what is used to justify premise 6. But this conflicts with premise 5. Now, premise 5 is not mentioned explicitly by Plato, but it seems to be the crucial item required to generate the first Conclusion. And...does it (or the more modern 5\*) seem plausible to you on its own merits?