

**When Christianity invites believers to allow their soul to be saved,
is it a Platonic soul that is in question?**

When one considers the most important things in life it is difficult not to think upon the question of what happens to us when we die. It is a question that occupies us all at some stage in our lives, and philosophers and theologians have debated possible answers for thousands of years. It is hard to imagine a more crucial question.

The idea of life after death is very much linked to the idea of soul, as the soul suggests a part of the human being that at least has the potential to continue after we die. General definitions of the soul sometimes include the word ‘immortality’¹, and if we believe in the soul we may hope for some kind of afterlife, with an immaterial part of us continuing after the cessation of the material body. The nature of any afterlife that we might come to know is a troublesome matter, and one that I will examine more closely in the exposition that follows.

The New Testament says, “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9) The salvation of the human soul is a central idea in Christian doctrine, but what kind of soul is it that Christians believe can be saved? What is the nature of that soul, and when and where does it exist?

In this essay I will be exploring the above questions, and seeking to answer them by referring to Platonic thought and Christian thought. My discussion of Plato’s ideas will centre around the *Phaedo*, which of all of Plato’s works offers the most insight into the philosopher’s thinking about the soul, but I will also draw from a number of other Platonic dialogues and commentators on Plato. In terms of Christianity, I will focus mainly on the Bible, but will also bring in the views of important theologians such as Origen and Augustine, who have contributed to Christian understanding of the soul.

¹ See for instance <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/soul> [accessed 5 March 2012]

Note on the Platonic dialogues: Plato or Socrates?

Although Plato wrote the *Phaedo*, the introduction to the dialogue states that he was absent from the scene due to sickness, therefore the accuracy of his version of events can be called into question. Also, we must ask, how much of Socrates' speech in the dialogue is truly his own, and how much is Plato putting his ideas into the mouth of Socrates? This question is open to debate.

It has been suggested that the *Apology*, which portrays the trial of Socrates and in which the philosopher is agnostic about the afterlife, might be a more true reflection of the "real" views of Socrates than the *Phaedo*, where he argues passionately for the reality of the afterlife. But as Robert Leet Patterson points out, it is perfectly possible that both dialogues accurately portray Socrates' thought, and the difference in perspectives can be accounted for by the different circumstances in which the dialogues take place; Socrates is more likely to have been open about his views of the afterlife in his prison cell (in *Phaedo*) than in a law court (in *Apology*) which is a much more formal setting.²

Patterson also points out that Socrates' views of the afterlife may have developed between the time of *Apology* and *Phaedo*, as Socrates was pondering over his coming execution. Or it could well be that the thoughts are spontaneous, coming to Socrates on the day as the dialogue unfolds. All of these arguments support the view that it really is Socrates' thought that we encounter in the *Phaedo*, but one must acknowledge that there is conflicting evidence and remain ambivalent on this point. Aristotle, for instance, explicitly affirms that the Ideas under discussion in the *Phaedo* are the brainchild of Plato rather than Socrates.³

² Robert Leet Patterson, *Plato on Immortality* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1965), p 6

³ See Patterson, p 8

The Composition of the Human Soul

Let us first consider the question of whether the human soul is a single entity, or is constituted of a number of different entities, or parts.

In the *Phaedo* Socrates separates wants, desires and fears from thought and associates the former three with the body, and the latter with the soul. “[No] thought of any kind ever comes to us from the body”, Socrates says.⁴

Socrates is quite intent that the body, with its wants, desires and fears, is responsible for a great deal of life’s troubles. He argues, “Only the body and its desires cause war, civil discord and battles, for all wars are due to the desire to acquire wealth, and it is the body and the care of it, to which we are enslaved, which compel us to acquire wealth, and all this makes us too busy to practice philosophy.”⁵

While Socrates associates the body with the troubles and miseries described above, he associates the soul with the ultimate good, which is the pursuit of wisdom, or philosophy. In terms of the composition of the soul, then, we are seeing that Socrates saw the soul as thoughtful and contemplative and capable of goodness. But are there attributes other than thought that constitute the human soul?

In his book about Plato, R. M. Hare discusses Plato’s divisions of the soul into “desire”, “reason” and “spirit”.⁶ This is a rather different take on the nature of soul than that described above, but it is nevertheless present in other Platonic dialogues, most notably the *Republic*. Hare expresses a problem with such divisions: “does it leave the self enough of a unity to match our commonsense conviction that it is a single ‘I’ that has both the conflicting motives?”⁷

In the *Republic* Plato discusses the tripartite soul, and how the three parts of the soul are equivalent to the three classes (the producing class, the auxiliary class, and the

⁴ G. M. A. Grube, *Plato: Five Dialogues (Second Edition)* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), p 103

⁵ Grube, p 102

⁶ R. M. Hare, *Plato: Past Masters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p 53

⁷ Hare, p 55

deliberative class) in the ideal state.⁸ The argument proceeds saying that because the parts of the soul and state correspond in number, they also correspond in characteristics. So, for instance, “whereby the individual is brave, so and thereby is the state brave” and “a man is just in the same way in which we found the state to be just”.⁹ In terms of the soul’s constituents, the rational principle has as its ally the spirited principle, and together these exercise control over the concupiscent (desire) principle. The just man has harmony between the three principles, and the unjust man has strife between the three principles.¹⁰

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato uses the simile of reason, the charioteer, controlling two horses, spirit and appetite¹¹. The simile obviously implies that spirit and appetite are wild, and need to be mastered by reason and the rational mind. But once again here we have a tripartite soul, divided into three components.

The theologian Augustine, discussing the delight of listening to religious music, expresses the struggle between different components of the soul - reason and the senses:

But my physical delight, which has to be checked from enervating the mind, often deceives me when the perception of the senses is unaccompanied by reason, and is not patiently content to be in a subordinate place. It tries to be first and to be in the leading role, though it deserves to be allowed only as secondary to reason. So in these matters I sin unawares, and only afterwards become aware of it.¹²

There is a parallel here with Plato’s concept of soul, although Augustine is making two divisions rather than three.

So what does the Bible have to say about the composition of the human soul? The answer is very little. The Bible makes clear divisions between body and soul, but on

⁸ Tom Griffith (ed), *Plato: Republic* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997), p 132

⁹ Griffith, p 140

¹⁰ Griffith, p 143

¹¹ Hare, p 56

¹² Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p 208

the question of the composition of the soul it is very unclear. We do read in the New Testament "...may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thessalonians 5:23), but if anything this scripture suggests a tripartite person rather than a tripartite soul. We find in Isaiah 29:8 (KJV) the phrase "his soul hath appetite" which at least makes some connection to what we have seen in the Platonic view of the soul's composition.

In summary then, there is no clear connection between the composition of the Platonic soul discussed in *Republic* and *Phaedo*, and the composition of the soul of Christian thought. Although Augustine recognises a division between reason and the senses, the Bible offers little to suggest that a tripartite soul was the soul envisaged by the writers of the Old and New Testaments.

The pre-existence of the human soul

Let us next consider whether the human soul exists in any form before birth. It is clear that with birth, a body comes into existence, but does a soul also come into existence? Or is a pre-existing soul somehow infused into the body at some time between conception and birth?

In his book *Confessions*, St Augustine asks questions about what life was like in his mother's womb, and whether he had existed before that time. Augustine is frank about his confusion and uncertainty over this matter, and writes, "What, Lord, do I wish to say except that I do not know whence I came to be in this mortal life or, as I may call it, this living death? I do not know where I came from."¹³

Chadwick, in *Early Christian Thought*, writes "The pre-existence of souls Origen finds in scripture in the text that John the Baptist leapt in his mother's womb."¹⁴ The scripture that Origen had in mind is Luke 1:41, which reads, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit". But does this really provide evidence of the pre-existence of souls? The

¹³ Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p 6

¹⁴ Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*, p 115

physicalist might argue that the baby's brain and faculties had been sufficiently developed by this stage in the pregnancy for the foetus to express itself by jumping in this way. There is no evidence here of a soul as such.

In *The World of the Early Christians*, Joseph Kelly explains that historically, Christians have not accepted that souls exist prior to the body. "The pre-existence of souls, definitely believed by Origen and probably by Augustine at some point in his life, never became a point of Christian doctrine. Debates raged about the origin of the soul, but, as best as scholars can tell, few Christians believed in a spiritual world of pre-existent souls."¹⁵

What did Plato have to say about the pre-existence of souls? He seems to have believed that *all* souls, being eternal, pre-exist. Socrates argues that the number of souls that exist must always remain the same:

...you understand that the souls that exist must be always the same. For if none be destroyed, they cannot become fewer. Nor yet can they become more numerous, because if any class of things immortal became more numerous, you know that something mortal must have contributed to swell its numbers; in which case, everything would finally be immortal.¹⁶

While it may be a little unclear what Socrates is saying here about the relationship between the mortal and the immortal, his statement raises some important questions. For instance, how would Socrates explain the growth of human population on the planet, if there are always the same number of souls? Presumably, the answer would have to be that human souls are being reincarnated from animals and other life forms, or beings in some spiritual realm. This problem is never discussed by Plato.

There is, then, some evidence to demonstrate that both historic Christians and Plato believed in the pre-existence of the soul. While there is little discussion of the nature of the pre-existing soul in Christian theology, Plato at least is firm in his belief that there are always the same number of souls existing immortally. In order to elaborate further on the subject of pre-existence, we will now look at reincarnation.

¹⁵ Joseph F. Kelly, *The World of the Early Christians* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997), p 59

¹⁶ Griffith, p 344

Reincarnation of the soul

In the *Phaedo* we find the idea that human souls are reincarnated into the bodies of different animals depending on one's behaviour in a previous life. Those who have practised "popular and social virtue" will be reincarnated into "a social or gentile group, either of bees or wasps or ants, and then again the same kind of human group, and so be moderate men."¹⁷ The idea is that a virtuous life leads to a virtuous rebirth.

Rohde summarises Plato's philosophy in relation to the soul (and reincarnation) in the following way:

Not unscathed does it leave behind it, in death, its ill-assorted companion, the body. Then it goes into an intermediate region of bodiless existence in which it must do penance for the misdeeds of its life on earth, and free itself from their effects. After that it is driven away once more into a body and transported to a fresh life upon earth, the character of which it chooses for itself in accordance with the special nature that it had evolved in its earlier incarnation upon earth.¹⁸

Rohde elaborates further on Plato's views concerning reincarnation, as he writes that souls "may even sink so low as the animals" in certain incarnations. The factors that influence the kind of incarnation the soul receives are "the success or failure of its conflict with the passions and desires of the body". The soul has a clear task, "it must *free* itself from its impure companions, sensual Lust and the darkening of the powers of Reason". Success in these exploits will lead to the "way upwards" which at last leads the soul into "complete immunity from renewed incarnation and brings it home again into the kingdom of everlasting untroubled Being."¹⁹

The above description of Plato's philosophy echoes a common understanding in many Indian religious traditions – the idea that we are reincarnated a number of times before being at last liberated from the cycle of birth and death and entering into the blissful realm of the everlasting.

¹⁷ Grube, p 120

¹⁸ Erwin Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks* (London: Kegan Paul, 1925), p 467

¹⁹ Rohde, pp 467-468

In the *Timaeus* we find a vivid account of some of the details of Plato's account of reincarnation that deserves to be quoted in full:

And anyone who lived well for his appointed time would return home to his native star and live an appropriately happy life; but anyone who failed to do so would be changed into a woman at his second birth. And if he still did not refrain from wrong, he would be changed into some animal suitable to his particular kind of wrongdoing, and would have no respite from change and suffering until he allowed the motion of the Same and uniform in himself to subdue all that multitude of riotous and irrational feelings which have clung to it since its association with fire, water, air, and earth, and with reason thus in control returned once more to his first and best form.²⁰

It would not be at all politically correct these days to talk of failure in life resulting in being reincarnated as a woman, and it does indeed seem to be a strange belief. Once again here we find the idea of reincarnation into animal forms, and the passage echoes our earlier quote from Rohde as it discusses the subduing of the passions as being an essential factor contributing to a happy reincarnation.

Although I have not found a great deal in Christian theology to suggest similar views on reincarnation, it seems that Origen at least did hold a view that the soul passes through a number of lives. In his book *Human Immortality and the Redemption of Death*, Simon Tugwell writes:

Origen was regarded, fairly or unfairly, as having undermined the decisiveness of death and judgement, by teaching that the soul can pass through an unlimited number of lives of various kinds in various worlds, ranging from the angelic to the demonic, apparently with no definitive arrival either in bliss or damnation.²¹

But if Origen did indeed believe in the reincarnation of souls, it wasn't it a Platonic sense, as Chadwick explains:

Even if Origen felt bound to concede that reincarnation is 'a very plausible opinion', yet he sharply attacks Plato's notion that the rational soul, made in

²⁰ H. D. P. Lee (translator), *Plato: Timaeus* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), p 58

²¹ Simon Tugwell, *Human Immortality and the Redemption of Death* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1990), p 75

the image of God, can sink so low as to be imprisoned in an animal body – a doctrine which the Platonists defended on the ground that all souls are of one essence and form.²²

Looking to the Bible, there are no scriptures that appear in the Old or New Testaments that point obviously to the idea of reincarnation. At a push, one can find scriptures that perhaps point in the direction of such a perspective, though we should be very careful about how we interpret these. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 15:51, St Paul says “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed...”. Could Paul be talking about souls being reborn? It is possible, but doubtful.

There is no real evidence, then, that the Bible contains any descriptions of reincarnation. We do find in the theologian Origen a belief that souls go through a number of births, but it would be fair to say that most theologians have remained as uncertain and mystified as Augustine about the subject. Plato developed a far more comprehensive theory of reincarnation, which as we have seen involves the necessary taming of the passions in life, and higher or lower rebirths according to the way we behave in each successive life.

The afterlife

We have examined Christian and Platonic perspectives on the nature of the soul before human life begins, and we have also looked at reincarnation. An associated problem, and one that is of profound importance to our discussions concerning the soul, is what happens to a human being after death – in the afterlife.

It is clear that many of the ancient Greek philosophers, including Plato, believed in an afterlife. We find in Plato the idea of an underworld, also described as Hades, where some souls, if they have not lived well, go after they die. Others, if they have lived better lives, have a more promising future. As we read in the *Phaedo*:

It is likely that those who established the mystic rites for us were not inferior persons but were speaking in riddles long ago when they said that whoever

²² Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*, p 115

arrives in the underworld uninitiated will wallow in the mire, whereas he who arrives there purified and initiated will dwell with the Gods.²³

The above passage contains echoes of the well-known Christian idea of heaven and hell – we could link the idea of hell with the underworld described above and the idea of heaven as dwelling with the Gods, although in Christian theology we would of course say dwelling with the one God, rather than many Gods.

The ‘myth of Er’, at the end of Plato’s *Republic*, offers another insight into how the philosopher may have viewed the afterlife in terms of a heaven and a hell. According to the myth, Er was a brave man who was killed in battle, and who after being dead for 12 days came back to life and spoke of what he had experienced in the other world. Er recalled that souls either went to a heaven above, or into the Earth below, the latter of which was rather hellish. Those in the Earth suffered tenfold retribution for all the crimes and personal injuries they had committed. Those who had lived charitable, just, and holy, lives went to the heaven and received on the same principle their rewards.²⁴

The *Phaedo* contains other evidence that Plato envisioned a dualistic afterlife. In his article *The Soul and Immortality in the Phaedo*, David Bostock discusses how the *Phaedo* contains two distinct views of life after death. In the case of the philosopher, “at death all those aspects of conscious activity which depend upon the soul’s awareness of its body will fall away, and as a result the disembodied soul will be capable of pure reasoning and nothing else.”²⁵ In the case of other deaths, “pretty well all the conscious activities of ordinary living human beings will persist into the disembodied state.”²⁶ This seems to capture something of how Plato viewed the afterlife.

In terms of Christian theology, Augustine appears to have been rather ambivalent in his discussion of the afterlife. In *Confessions*, he writes:

²³ Grube, p 106

²⁴ Griffith, pp 347-355

²⁵ David Bostock, ‘The Soul and Immortality in the Phaedo’ in *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul* ed. by Gail Fine (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp 404-424 (p 411)

²⁶ Bostock, p 411

Life is a misery, death is uncertain. It may suddenly carry us off. In what state shall we depart this life? Where are we to learn the things we have neglected here? And must we not rather pay for this negligence with punishments? What if death itself will cut off and end all anxiety by annihilating the mind?²⁷

Augustine's rather bleak ponderance about death annihilating the mind finds little support in the Bible, which tends rather to expound the kind of dualistic 'heaven and hell' view of the afterlife that we found in Plato. We read in Matthew 10:28 "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell". We read also in 2 Corinthians 5:10 "For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil". In Luke 23:43 Jesus is speaking to the 'good thief' who is being crucified with him and says "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise". The above scripture quotations reinforce the idea that good souls go to heaven bad souls go to hell.

Origen reinforces this view in his own theology. In *Origen De Principiis* he writes:

The soul, having a substance and life of its own, shall after its departure from the world, be rewarded according to its deserts, being destined to obtain either an inheritance of eternal life and blessedness, if its actions shall have procured this for it, or to be delivered up to eternal fire and punishments, if the guilt of its crimes shall have brought it down to this...²⁸

There are clearly parallels, then, between what Christian theology says about the afterlife, and what Plato says on this subject. Both schools of thought suggest that after death we go either to a happier place, or a place of suffering, depending on how we have lived our lives. Plato associated good living with being a philosopher, which is an idea we do not find in Christian theology (for Christians, living a good life is more about living from a place of faith in Christ). But both Platonism and Christianity agree that bad deeds committed during life have the repercussion that our soul will go to a place of torment when we die.

²⁷ Chadwick, *Saint Augustine: Confessions*, p 105

²⁸ Origen quoted in Gary Petty, *What Does the Bible Say About the Immortal Soul* <http://www.ucg.org/death/what-does-bible-say-about-immortal-soul/> [accessed 06 March 2012]

Conclusion

In this essay I have compared Platonic thought with Christian thought on various subjects relating to the human soul. I have explored ideas relating to the composition of the soul, the pre-existence of the soul, reincarnation, and the afterlife.

Returning to the essay question, I can conclude that although there are some similarities between the Christian soul and the Platonic soul, such as pre-existence and potential destinations after death, the differences in perspectives (particularly in the domain of the composition of the soul) are significant enough that I don't believe the soul we find in Platonic thought is the same soul being discussed in the Bible and by Christian theologians.

The soul remains a mysterious and elusive entity. This essay has demonstrated that it is possible to speak about the soul in ways that make it seem more tangible, but the disparate views presented here only reinforce the idea that we may never understand the human soul during our lives on earth.

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