The Immortality Arguments: More on Dialectics

Starting at 70a, Socrates gives a series of proofs for the immortality of the soul. Is it appropriate to represent these in terms of premises and conclusions, as if they were deductively valid arguments? Yes and no.

1. Putting the arguments in Plato's dialogues so as to reveal their logical structure begun with the earliest commentators at the Academy, occasionally explicitly using Aristotle's syllogistic figures.[1] Revealing an argument's logical structure is instructive and has didactical value: it tells us whether it is valid and what *general principles* are in play (and how they hang together); but it does not tell us much about an argument's plausibility, or about the truth about the premises.

2. This holds for arguments that Socrates presents *but does not endorse*, such as the immortality arguments. They are not meant to be Socrates's demonstrative proofs of the immortal soul. Rather, Socrates aims to adduce support for the claim, that is, arguments *someone* might make in defence of the immortality of the soul.[2] The aim is to *assess* the best arguments, and hence to *persuade*, or to induce conviction that the claim has merit. This is the key idea behind Plato's *dialectic*. (More below.)

3. Hence, πίστις (pistis) and its cognates are frequently used (e.g., 'it requires not little faith and <u>assurance</u> to believe that the soul exists after death' [70b]; 'we must <u>convince</u> Cebes too' [77a]; 'I found [recollection theory] remarkably <u>convincing</u>' [92a]). This is also consistent with Simmias' intriguing remark about Cebes' hostility to logical argument: 'he is the most determined of persons in <u>refusing to be convinced</u> by <u>argument</u>' (καρτερώτατος ἀνθρώπων ἐστὶν πρὸς τὸ ἀπιστεῖν τοῖς λόγοις[3]). (Simmias and Cebes are Pythagoreans.) Yet, using the same phrase (*apistein tois logois*) Cebes says he has no reason not to find Socrates last argument convincing (107a). Key theme: be satisfied that the best theory is <u>accepted</u>. Plato's word for this is ἀποδέχομαι (apodechomai) and its cognates. (But see note 4.)

4. Arguably, trust, faith, and conviction (all cognates of *pistis*) contrast with *proof*. Plato uses the phrase ἱκανὸν τεκμήριον (hikanon tekmêrion) frequently (e.g., 68b, 70d, 72a, 96c): it means 'sufficient proof' in an argumentative sense. So, the immortality arguments can be taken to be proper proofs. So, is this incoherent?[4]

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1   See Barnes, J. (2003). Argument in Ancient Philosophy. In D. Sedley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy* (pp. 20–41). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2   Hence Taylor: "[M]ost men find it very hard to believe that the soul is not 'dispersed like smoke' when a man dies, and [Cebes] shares their difficulty. To complete his 'case' Socrates must therefore satisfy us that the soul continues to be, and to be intelligent after the death of the 'man.' Accordingly he now proceeds to produce three *considerations* which point to that conclusion. *It is not said that they are demonstrative.* [Cebes] had asked only for πίστις [pistis] (conviction), *not for demonstration*, and Socrates professes no more than to consider whether immortality is 'likely' (εἰκός [eikos]) or not. In point of fact, the first two proofs are found to break down and the third […] is said by Socrates (107b6) to need fuller examination. *Thus it is plain that Plato did not mean to present the arguments as absolutely probative to his own mind.*" Taylor, A. E. (1937). *Plato. The Man and his Works*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd (pp. 183–4). My emphases.

3   Translit. *katerôtatos anthrôpôn estin pros to apistein tois logois*.

4   For Aristotle *apodeixis* is a demonstration, i.e. a deductive syllogistic proof (see, e.g., *Rhetoric* 1355b35). For Plato: it just means to accept (92d), find a proof (100b), or to prove (105e); e.g.,

5. No. We need to step back. (i) Socrates suggests the soul's immortality with a series of considerations in his 'court-style' defence (63b ff.). (ii) Cebes thinks further assurance (*pistis*) is needed (70a). (iii) Therefore, Socrates present a series of 'sufficient proofs': from opposites (70b ff.), from recollection (72e ff.), and from affinity (78b) ff.). (iv) But these proofs fail (to convince), for Simmias and Cebes have objections (84d ff.). (v) Socrates refutes the attunement theory (91d ff.); yet finds Cebes's objection (the soul is merely long-lived, not immortal) more difficult to handle (96a ff.). This leads to a further proof: Forms are the best hypothesis to show, or derive, the soul's immortality (100b ff.). (vi) Still, Simmias feels 'misgivings' (ἀπιστίαν, apistian), which Socrates shares: 'even if you find our original assumptions [ὑποθέσεις τὰς πρώτας, hypotheseis tas prôtas] convincing, they still need more accurate consideration' (107a ff.). (vii) Socrates presents the key thought or intuition: unless the soul is immortal, ethics is impossible (107c); and: being good and virtuous now pays off later (114c).

6. The Point: the immortality arguments are *dialectic stages* that test one hypothesis after the other, and so the discussion increasingly closes in on what looks maximally plausible or certain (see Handout 3: *elenchus*, the art of refutation). These arguments are hence not intended to show by themselves the immortality of the soul; *they are the hypotheses* used to exercise dialectic: like rungs on a ladder, or stepping stones, 'to reach a point where nothing needs to be taken for granted, and which is the starting point for everything' (*Republic* 511b). This is consistent with Plato's view of dialectic as the art or technique of debate and discussion that aims at truth (*Republic* 531d ff.), rather than rhetorical victory (cp. eristic; *Republic* 454a). Dialectic is the method to establish agreement (e.g., *Theatetus* 167e), by identifying hypotheses and then teasing out implications whose truth or falsity can be tested. So, the dialectic process involves drawing out consequences of hypotheses and trying to confirm them.[5] Nice example: recollection (72e).[6]

7. Further Passages. (a) *Misologic* (89d ff.): those who trust arguments that lead to contradictory claims, or those who argue both sides (like the sophists) develop a hate of logic (90b) instead of sound dialectic skills (91a–c). (b) *New Method* (99b–100b): in order to discover the truth about things, we need theories (*logoi*). (*Logos* appears ca. 80 times in *Phaedo*.) Beginning with the best, or least vulnerable, we accept what is consistent with it and reject what is not. Example: if the theory of Forms is true, it follows that the soul is immortal. (c) *Antologicians* (101d–e): if the basic hypothesis is in doubt, we assume an even more basic one, perhaps until we reach some maximally certain self-evident truth. (How is this known? The *daimonion*, perhaps.)

Simmias says that 'the proof is quite satisfactory' (ἱκανῶς ἀποδέδεικται, hikanôs apodedeiktai; 77a).

5   Benson, H. (2006). Plato's Method of Dialectic. In H. Benson (ed.), *A Companion to Plato* (ch. 7). Oxford: Blackwell.

6   Also: since we cannot *know* whether the soul is immortal, we have to make do with hypotheses (see line analogy: *eikasia* [illusion] and *pistis* are kinds of *doxa* or opinion; *dianoia* [mathematical reasoning] and *noesis* [pure reasoning] are kinds of *episteme* or knowledge; *Republic* 509d ff.).