

## **Plato as a Philosophy Salesman in the *Phaedo***

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### **Introduction**

In this paper, I attempt to argue that Plato's main intent in the *Phaedo* is not to build and present an argument for the immortality of the soul, but rather to elevate, promote, and in a sense "sell" philosophy as the highest pursuit of humanity. As an initial support for this argument, it is worth emphasizing that the *Phaedo* presents in a somewhat dramatic manner how Socrates spent the last day of his life philosophizing with his students. Thus, it can be said that the setting of the *Phaedo* in itself already sets an appropriate backdrop against which philosophy can be promoted as the ultimate human endeavour that is worth undertaking, in the sense that even in the face of death, the true lover of wisdom would still choose to spend his or her remaining time on earth practicing philosophy.

However, it would not be sufficient to simply rely on this connection with the dialogue's dramatic setting to assert that the dialogue's main purpose is to promote and "sell" philosophy. Thus, I now attempt to strengthen this assertion further by presenting three supporting arguments.

### **1. Plato's main intent is to promote philosophy to the Pythagoreans, and not to construct proofs for Pythagorean beliefs**

It is important to note that Socrates' main discussants in the dialogue, Simmias and Cebes, are Pythagoreans who had core beliefs on the immortality of the soul, reincarnation, and the notion that the body contaminates the soul. It can also be noted that in the first part of the *Phaedo*, when Phaedo enumerates to Echecrates the people who were present during Socrates' death (59b-c), Simmias and Cebes are identified as strangers, which probably

simply means that they they are from cities outside Athens, but which could also imply that they are less acquainted with Socrates and Socrates is likewise less acquainted with them, as compared with the other students of Socrates who are locals of Athens.

I assert that Plato's main intent in the *Phaedo* is to promote philosophy to the Pythagoreans, that is to persuade his discussants who happen to be Pythagoreans that philosophy is the highest pursuit of humanity, and not to prove certain Pythagorean doctrines and beliefs through argumentation *per se*. Conceivably, Plato had a certain degree of proficiency in the arts of persuasion and selling, and one of the fundamental principles of persuasion and selling is to first have a good understanding of the psychology and points of view of your target audience or target market, and to customize the way you communicate your persuasive proposition based on this understanding to ensure that your communication is relevant to them, and thus to increase the probability that what you are selling would have a higher degree of general acceptability to your target audience<sup>1</sup>. Thus, it can be said that Plato's intent is to customize his persuasive communication framework for Pythagoreans and this act of customization entails that the core beliefs of the Pythagorean school be integrated into his arguments to promote and sell philosophy. Therefore, given Plato's intent to sell philosophy, invoking arguments that examine core Pythagorean beliefs was a means towards an end rather than these arguments being ends in themselves. Integrating Pythagorean doctrines into his arguments was necessary only because his target audience were the Pythagoreans, or in a broader sense persons concerned with questions that can be associated with Pythagorean beliefs (e.g. the immortality of the soul), and such an integration is variable in the sense that if the target audience in Plato's dialogue were not concerned with Pythagorean concerns, he would not deem it necessary to invoke arguments on Pythagorean doctrines into the dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am influenced by my background knowledge on marketing and persuasive selling models which I have been exposed to in my experiences of working in the consumer goods industry. The basic principle in marketing or selling a product is to first have a comprehensive understanding of the needs (i.e. the pains and aspirations) of your strategic target consumer and to formulate your integrated marketing campaign based on this understanding.

This is also probably the reason why the same distinctly strong argumentation in favour of core Pythagorean beliefs, particularly of the belief on the immortality of the soul, is absent in many other dialogues of Plato. For instance, in the *Apology* (40c-41c) Plato explores openness to either of two possibilities about death, either death marks the end of consciousness and perception or death marks the transition of the soul from its current state to another state. Thus, in the *Apology* Plato does not argue strongly for the conclusion that the soul is immortal.

I believe that in raising the question on what Plato's main purpose in the *Phaedo* is, it is important to draw the distinction between the fundamental arguments in the dialogue, as opposed to what can be called supplementary arguments which Plato invoked to make his fundamental arguments more relevant and consequently more acceptable to his target audience. Although Plato allotted a significant portion of the dialogue towards constructing arguments in favour of core Pythagorean doctrines, a more holistic reading of the *Phaedo* would show that Plato's arguments towards elevating and promoting philosophy as the highest human pursuit takes precedence over these supplementary arguments which are only invoked as necessary elements in his persuasive communication framework which is customized to fit the character and psychology of a specific target audience or target market, in this case the Pythagoreans or persons concerned with questions that can be associated with Pythagorean doctrines.

## **2. Plato puts primacy on the discourse rather than on the conclusions**

I also assert that in the *Phaedo*, Plato puts primacy on the discourse rather than on the conclusions and given this, proving the immortality of the soul or any other Pythagorean doctrine for that matter cannot be the main purpose of the dialogue. Rather, it is the promotion of the practice of

philosophy and of the culture of discourse and argumentation which is Plato's primary intent in the dialogue.

This can be clearly seen in how Socrates encourages Simmias and Cebes to raise their objections (84c) to the argument that has been constructed as of that point in favour of the belief on the immortality of the soul. On one hand, this can be interpreted as Plato endeavouring to further strengthen the position that the soul is indeed immortal by demonstrating that it can survive objections but on the other hand, this can also be interpreted as Plato emphasizing that it is the process of argumentation and philosophizing that led to the position, and not the position itself, that is most important. The latter interpretation can be reinforced by looking at how Socrates warned against misology (89d) as he saw how his audience became discouraged after Simmias and Cebes raised their objections. In this section of the *Phaedo*, Socrates makes an analogy between misology and misanthropy and asserts that just because one argument seems refuted does not mean that one should develop a general repulsion against all arguments, in the same way that just because one man seems evil does not mean that one should develop a general hatred against all men. Socrates asserts that most arguments are still worth engaging in, in the same way that most men are neither absolutely good nor absolutely evil, and thus clearly emphasizes that the practice of argumentation retains its value even after a specific argument or position seems to have lost its worth.

Immediately prior to narrating Socrates' warning against misology, *Phaedo* likewise tells a story of Socrates saying that they should both take an oath to cut their hair if their argument is defeated (89b-c). I believe that this is not to be taken to mean that Socrates and *Phaedo* should take an oath to fight for the preservation of the particular argument or position in favour of the immortality of the soul but rather, this could be taken to mean that Socrates and *Phaedo* should be willing to take an oath to defend a worthy argument in general. This latter interpretation further reinforces the assertion that in the *Phaedo*, it is the practice of argumentation and

philosophizing that Plato deems to be of primary importance rather than any specific argument or position in particular.

This second supporting argument can be further supported by looking at how Socrates eventually responded to the objections of Simmias and Thebes (91d-107b). My reading of this section of the *Phaedo* is that the way Socrates responded to the objections is not straightforwardly aimed towards refuting the objections to redeem the strength of the position that the soul is immortal. Rather, the key objective of Socrates' response to the objections is to demonstrate that Simmias' and Cebes' personal doubts regarding core Pythagorean beliefs, which conceivably they already subscribe to being Pythagoreans themselves, can be resolved through the practice of philosophy. If this reading is accepted, it can then be said that in this section of the *Phaedo*, Plato elevates the practice of philosophy and argumentation to a level that is above any doctrine or conviction that is obtained by faith in the sense that philosophy could be the metajustification behind faith.

I believe that this reading of sections 91d-107b of the *Phaedo* as mentioned above is plausible as shown by the manner by which Socrates addressed the objections of Simmias and Cebes. Socrates addressed the objections by examining and exposing the fundamental flaws and inconsistencies in the basic argumentative frameworks of the objections. For instance, in responding to Simmias' objection, Socrates draws a clarifying distinction between these two dualisms – composite versus non-composite and visible versus invisible and consequently presents that raising the objection would entail acceptance of a proposition ("the soul is a harmony") that is inconsistent with a stronger proposition that has been earlier accepted ("learning is recollection") (92 c-e). Likewise, part of Socrates' response to Cebes' objection is a clarification of the distinction between mechanism and teleology (98b-99d). A key element of the response also consisted of clarifying the distinction between the Forms and the particulars that participate in the Forms (104b-107b) to refute the argument that the soul perishes before the last of many bodies in the same way that a weaver

perishes before the last of many cloaks. Thus, it can be said that Plato's underlying message in the responses to the objections of Simmias and Cebes is that doubts against matters of faith can be resolved through clarity of argumentation and that convictions derived from faith can also be reinforced, strengthened, validated, and even alternatively derived from philosophical argumentation<sup>2</sup>.

After narrating a myth regarding the afterlife, Plato makes a statement in 114d which further reinforces the assertion that one can risk on a belief out of faith (e.g. the belief on the immortality of the soul) because such a belief is supported by reason (e.g. the arguments in favour of the position that the soul is immortal, as well as the arguments refuting the objections to it). Thus, in a sense, the practice of reason is presented as the ultimate metajustification for all convictions and positions, including ones that could otherwise be derived from faith alone. This reading further reinforces the assertion that in the *Phaedo*, Plato puts primacy on the discourse and on the practice of philosophical argumentation rather than on specific arguments and positions, particularly those that are constructed to prove the immortality of the soul.

### **3. Plato differentiates philosophy by elevating it as a form of transcendence**

The grounding of my third and last supporting argument towards the thesis that the main purpose of the *Phaedo* is to promote and sell philosophy as the highest human pursuit is based on showing how Plato differentiated philosophy by elevating it as some form of transcendence. Here, I again make a reference to a fundamental principle in persuasion and marketing, which is the principle that in order make persuasion and selling more effective, the marketer or salesman must differentiate what is being promoted from other

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<sup>2</sup> This statement can be linked to Habermas' discourse theory. A position that is conventionally derived from faith can strengthen its claim to legitimacy by establishing more robust bases of justification through discursive argumentation.

things. This is to sharpen the uniqueness of the thing being promoted and ultimately to make it stand out as superior as opposed to other competing things<sup>3</sup>. In the context of the *Phaedo*, I believe that Plato made a clear differentiation between philosophy and other human pursuits and conducted most of this differentiation by elevating philosophy to a level that is superior over, and transcendent of, other human concerns and endeavours.

It is important to note that even before examining the arguments towards proving the immortality of the soul, Plato already makes several assertions in the *Phaedo* which differentiates philosophy from other human pursuits and elevates it as a form of transcendence. For instance, Plato asserts that philosophy is the highest kind of art (61a), that philosophy is the practice for death (64a), that philosophy is an enabler to transcend fear (68d-e), and that philosophical wisdom is true virtue (69a-d). After constructing the initial arguments towards proving that the soul is immortal, Plato makes further elaborations on the nature of philosophy in terms of transcending the fear of death through philosophy (84e-85b) and in terms of philosophy being some sort of passport to the company of the gods (82c). The nature of philosophy is a recurring theme throughout the dialogue and it can be said that Plato's objective is not to simply elaborate on the nature of philosophy, but to differentiate philosophy from other human pursuits and ultimately elevate it as the highest among all human endeavours.

Dualisms are also key recurring elements throughout the dialogue and I likewise assert that Plato's main intent in invoking these dualisms is not to provide an argumentative framework to prove the immortality of the soul, but rather to differentiate and elevate philosophy against other human pursuits. Early on in the dialogue (66a), Plato already invokes what can possibly be considered as a dualism between approaching an object with thought and reason alone versus approaching an object with bodily sense perception. Plato clearly associates philosophy with the former which he also clearly elevates as superior over the latter. Plato goes on and states in 66e that "if we

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<sup>3</sup> Or in marketing jargon, to create a unique selling proposition (USP).

are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself.” These statements, together with the earlier claim that philosophy is a practice for death (64a) constitute the establishment of the initial strong linkage between the practice of philosophy and the soul. Plato juxtaposes the claim that it is reason and the love of wisdom (i.e. philosophy) which nourishes the soul side by side with the Pythagorean doctrine that indulging in bodily desires and earthly concerns contaminates the soul.

The *Phaedo* then proceeds with the construction of arguments towards the proof of the immortality of the soul. It is in the affinity argument (70c-80b) where most of the dualisms are invoked, and a key component of proving the immortality of the soul is asserting the affinity of the soul with what can be deemed as the superior side of each dualism and on the other hand, the affinity of the body with the inferior side. This is probably best summarized in the following passage from 80b:

Consider then, Cebes, whether it follows from all that has been said that the soul is most likely the divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself, whereas the body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble, and never consistently the same...

After putting forward the affinity argument towards proving that the soul is immortal, Plato then brings back the previously established linkage between the practice of philosophy and the nourishment of the soul and presents an argument that can be summarized as such - that the practice of philosophy is the key enabler for the dualistic separation of the body and the soul, and hence the immortality of the soul, to be fully realized (80b-84b). This further supports the assertion that Plato’s main purpose in invoking the dualisms in the affinity argument is to differentiate the practice of philosophy from other inferior human pursuits and elevate philosophy as a form of transcendence from the body and all its associated inferiorities. Thus, the

assertion that the soul is indeed immortal seems secondary against the claim that only true lovers of wisdom (i.e. true philosophers) can transcend the body towards this fully realized state of immortality with the soul.

Also, Plato invokes the Pythagorean belief on reincarnation (81e-82b) and implies that reincarnation as lower forms of being (e.g. animals) would be the fate of people who are preoccupied with non-philosophical pursuits during their lifetime, while on the other hand makes a statement that true philosophers would join the company of the gods (82c). Likewise, in narrating the myth about the afterlife (107e-114c), Plato reserves the best dwelling places in the afterlife for people who have practiced true philosophy. Thus, it can be said that in a sense Plato asserts that beyond the question of whether or not the soul is immortal, the ultimate and most important concern is whether a person has truly practiced philosophy in his or her lifetime. Such an assertion truly elevates philosophy as the highest human pursuit, even higher than the pursuit for immortality.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented three supporting arguments for the thesis that the main purpose of the *Phaedo* is not to prove the immortality of the soul but to elevate, promote, and in a sense “sell” philosophy as the highest human pursuit. In summary, it seems as though Plato demonstrates good marketing and salesmanship for philosophy in the *Phaedo* in the sense that 1) he crafted his persuasive communication framework in a way that is relevant to his target audience (the Pythagoreans, or in a broader sense, persons concerned with questions on Pythagorean beliefs), 2) he clearly put primacy on what he was promoting (philosophy and discourse) over supplementary elements that helped him sell (arguments in favour of Pythagorean beliefs), and 3) he showed clear points of differentiation of what he was selling (the practice of philosophy) which sharply contrasted it against

competition (other human pursuits) and emphasized that what he was selling was at the highest level among all.

At this point, I think this view of Plato as a philosophy salesman, at least as a reading of the *Phaedo*, could be plausible but if it turns out that certain objections would render this view implausible, my only hope is that, at the very least, some of the discussions here could be refined by a better mind and could be turned into worthy attempts at philosophizing which could serve as starting points for new philosophical discussions on the *Phaedo* and beyond.

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