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The philosopher's reward: contemplation and immortality in Plato's dialogues

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## 1 Introduction

In dialogues ranging from the *Symposium* to the *Timaeus*, Plato appears to propose that the philosopher's grasp of the forms may confer immortality upon him. Whatever can Plato mean in making such a claim? What does he take immortality to consist in, such that it could constitute a reward for philosophical enlightenment? And what, exactly, is the process by which the philosopher's grasp of the forms renders his soul immortal? Finally, how is this proposal compatible with Plato's repeated assertions, throughout his *corpus*, that all soul, not just philosophical soul, is immortal?

In response to this final question, O'Brien (1984: 200-1) and Sedley (2009) have suggested that Plato distinguishes different forms of immortality. From Homer onwards, the Greeks appear to have seen no difficulty in proposing both that all human soul persists after the death of the body and that select individuals can achieve immortality, either as a reward for exceptional achievement or as the result of mystical initiation (Burkert 1985: 300, O'Brien 200-1). O'Brien and Sedley propose that, following in this tradition, Plato distinguishes several forms of immortality. On the one hand, Plato maintains in the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus* and *Laws* that all soul is immortal in the sense of being imperishable. On the other hand, in dialogues such as the *Symposium* and *Timaeus*, Plato also suggests that certain individuals can attain an enhanced form of immortality, one that goes beyond the continued existence that all soul is assured of.<sup>1</sup> In what

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<sup>1</sup> *Symposium* 208b, 208e-9e, 212a; *Timaeus* 90a-d. Note that in the *Symposium*, Plato does not appear to claim that all soul is guaranteed immortality; I discuss this complication further in what follows.

follows, modifying Sedley's terminology, I refer to these as *general* and *earned* forms of immortality.<sup>2</sup> O'Brien associates earned immortality with a condition of never-ending blessedness that approximates the state of the gods (201); Sedley claims that earned immortality pertains to the individual human being, a soul-body composite, rather than his soul alone, and consists in his production of intellectual progeny or in his identification with reason (158-60). While both accounts are illuminating, they draw insufficient attention to the way in which the philosopher's earned immortality derives from the immortality of the forms that he contemplates.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, my aim is to offer a sustained discussion of the way in which philosophical contemplation of forms gives rise to earned immortality in two dialogues, the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium*.<sup>4</sup>

I shall approach this topic by applying the distinction between general and earned immortality to two related problems in the *Phaedo* and *Symposium*: as I shall demonstrate, the solution to the problem that I develop for the *Phaedo* offers the key to addressing a parallel difficulty that I uncover in the *Symposium*. In the *Phaedo*, a tension arises when we consider the relation of the Affinity Argument (78b-84b) to the other arguments for immortality in the dialogue. Whereas the other arguments treat immortality as an essential feature of all soul, the Affinity Argument appears to portray immortality as an achievement of only the philosopher's soul. How

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of convenience, I use the expression *general immortality* to combine Sedley's categories of essential and conferred immortality. By *general immortality*, I mean any form of immortality that applies to all human souls.

<sup>3</sup> But see Sedley 2009: 158 and 2017: 98-106.

<sup>4</sup> For a sustained and insightful discussion of immortality in the *Phaedo*, see Rowett's chapter in this volume. Rowett and I are in agreement in locating a form of immortality in the *Phaedo* that goes beyond mere extension in time. However, whereas Rowett identifies this form of immortality with timelessness, I identify it with changelessness; on my view, the soul is incapable of the atemporal mode of being of forms. Furthermore, whereas Rowett takes timeless immortality to be an essential feature of all souls, albeit one they must aspire fully to realize by divesting themselves of their corporeal existence, I take immortality as changelessness to be a state that is only attained by philosophical souls, through their assimilation to forms.

are these arguments compatible?<sup>5</sup> In the *Symposium*, the problem arises of why Plato should appear to deny the immortality of the soul in the flux passage (207c-8b), given his confidence concerning the immortality of the soul in dialogues assumed to pre- and post-date the *Symposium*.<sup>6</sup> Distinguishing between general and earned immortality addresses both problems in ways that are mutually illuminating. I shall argue that, while the *Phaedo* attributes general immortality to all soul, at the same time, in the Affinity Argument, it proposes that the philosopher's soul can achieve earned immortality as a result of its contemplation of forms. It is this exact form of immortality that Plato proposes is unavailable to human soul in the flux passage of the *Symposium*. At the same time, in the ascent passage (209e-12a), he holds out the possibility – albeit with significant reservations – that the philosopher's soul may transcend its humanity and achieve earned immortality as a result of its communion with the form.

I conclude by arguing that the central puzzle concerning immortality in the *Symposium* is not – as most critics have maintained<sup>7</sup> – why Plato should appear to deny immortality of the soul in the flux passage: the flux passage is concerned with earned, not general, immortality, and thus

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<sup>5</sup> Neither Sedley (2009) nor O'Brien (1984) applies the distinction between general and earned immortality to this problem in the *Phaedo*. Both authors do address the problem that I go on to describe in the *Symposium*, but along significantly different lines than myself. Both dissolve the appearance of inconsistency between the flux passage and Plato's other arguments for the immortality of the soul by arguing that the flux passage does not claim that the soul is mortal, but, rather, that its psychological states are in flux (O'Brien 192-5) or that the soul-body composite is mortal (Sedley 159-60). By contrast, I take the passage at face value, as denying that the soul is immortal; I resolve the potential inconsistency by maintaining that the form of immortality that it denies to human soul is earned, not general immortality.

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I take the *Phaedo* to pre-date the *Symposium*, and the *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, *Timaeus* and *Laws* to post-date it. For a defense of this assumption, see, e.g., Brandwood 1992, Kraut 1992 and, especially, Dover 1965.

<sup>7</sup> Contemporary discussion of this problem was initiated by Hackforth 1950 (though see earlier, Bury 1932: xlili-v); influential responses include Bluck 1955: 27-9, Crombie 1962: 361-3, Dover 1965, Guthrie 1975: 387-92, Luce 1952 and Robinson 1995: 125-7 (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1970). More recent discussions include Ademollo 2018: 52-5, Jorgenson 2018: 65-76, Morgan 1990: 90-3, Nightingale 2017, O'Brien 1984, Price 2004: 30-5, Rowe 1998: 185, Sedley 2009: 158-61, Sheffield 2006: 147-8, n. 47 and Woolf 2018: 98.

does not stand in opposition to Plato's arguments for general immortality in other dialogues. Rather, the central puzzle is why he should express reservations concerning the philosopher's prospects of attaining earned immortality, given his optimism on this count in other dialogues. Exploring this puzzle reveals an important progression in Plato's thought. Whereas the *Phaedo* is confident concerning the philosopher's prospects of attaining earned immortality, in the *Symposium*, Plato develops deep reservations on this issue; these doubts are addressed in later dialogues, when Plato modifies his account of earned immortality.

## 2 An Apparent Inconsistency in the *Phaedo*

Let us turn to a closer examination of the problem that I outlined for the *Phaedo*. In the *Phaedo*, Plato develops a number of arguments for the immortality of the soul. With the possible exception of the Affinity Argument, each attempts to demonstrate that all soul is immortal. Its immortality consists in its not perishing, its enduring. The Affinity Argument, however, stands in a difficult relation to the surrounding arguments for immortality. The argument begins with the explicit aim of proving to Simmias and Cebes that they need not fear that the soul will dissipate upon death (77d-e, 78b). On the face of it, then, the Affinity Argument is a further attempt to demonstrate that all soul is imperishable. However, as the argument progresses, it appears to establish a quite different conclusion, that only the philosopher's soul is immortal and, indeed, that most souls, failing to be philosophical, fail to be immortal.<sup>8</sup>

The argument begins by claiming that whatever is unchanging is most likely to be incomposite, and that what is incomposite is most likely to be insoluble (78c). Socrates'

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<sup>8</sup> To the extent that the theory of recollection assumes that all souls have a prenatal grasp of the forms, then they must all, in some sense, possess the kinship to the forms that is articulated in the Affinity Argument. However, in the souls of the many, this kinship is an unactualized potential, one that is inhibited by their attachment to their bodies; this attachment, in turn, causes them to assimilate to the corporeal and mortal, rather than to the incorporeal and immortal.

argumentative goal is to place the soul in the class of the unchanging, incomposite and hence insoluble. His argument proceeds in three stages. First, he observes that the forms are unchanging and imperceptible, whereas their instantiations are changing and perceptible; since the body is perceptible and the soul imperceptible, the body must belong to the class of the changing and hence perishable, the soul to the class of the unchanging and hence imperishable (78c-9b).<sup>9</sup> So far, so good. It is in the second stage of the Affinity Argument that our problems begin. Socrates states:

Whenever, on the one hand (μὲν), the soul uses the body to investigate something, whether through seeing or hearing or through some other sense – for this is what it is to investigate through the body, to investigate something through the senses – then it is dragged by the body to the things that are never the same, and it wanders and is stirred and is dizzy, as if drunk, because it is in contact with such things...On the other hand (δέ), whenever it investigates itself by itself, it departs towards there, to the pure and always existing and immortal and always the same, and because it is akin to it, it always comes to be with it whenever it comes to be itself by itself and it is able to do so, and it ceases from its wandering and, in relation to these things, it is always the same and stable, because it is in contact with such things. And this state of it is called wisdom. (79c-d)<sup>10</sup>

Cebes concludes on this basis that the soul ‘is completely and in every way more like what is always the same than that which is not’ (79e). But, on the face of it, it is difficult to see how this conclusion follows. According to Socrates’ argument, the soul is capable of being both changeful and changeless, depending on whether it devotes itself to sense-perception or to contemplation. The only way to make sense of the argument is to assume that the condition of the soul when it contemplates forms is somehow more revealing of its nature than its condition when it devotes itself to sense-perception. This assumption can, perhaps, be supported by Plato’s use of the *men ... de* (on the one hand...on the other hand) construction at 79c2 and d1: he thereby develops a

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<sup>9</sup> One puzzling feature of this argument is that it concludes that the soul is more akin to the class to which the forms belong than to the class to which their instantiations belong (78d-79a, 80a-b). But one might have thought that a virtuous soul belongs to the class of τὰ πολλὰ καλὰ, the many beautiful things (79d10).

<sup>10</sup> Translations are my own, though at points I borrow the phrasings of Nehamas and Woodruff 1989, Rowe 1998, and Sedley and Long 2011.

contrast between the condition of the soul when it tries to examine something *by means of the body* and its condition when it investigates *itself by itself*. Perhaps the implication is that the soul's true nature can only be discerned when it acts on its own, but is obscured when it is contaminated by the addition of an extraneous and opposed element, the body.<sup>11</sup> Alternately, we might follow Woolf (2004: 112) and Lorenz (2009) in taking the argument to imply that the soul is, in its truest nature, unchanging because that is its condition when it is performing its proper function and achieving its corresponding virtue, wisdom. Yet on either interpretation, the following difficulty arises. Even as the argument suggests that in its best and purest condition, the soul is unchanging, it relies on a contrast that implies that the soul is equally capable of being changeful and hence of belonging to the class of the perishable. A similar difficulty confronts us when we turn to the third, final stage of the Affinity Argument (79e-80a). Here, Socrates argues that since the soul rules over the body, it is akin to the divine, and belongs to the class of the immortal; conversely, the body, insofar as it is ruled, belongs to the class of the mortal. This suggests that souls which fail to rule over the body – in other words, the souls of all those non-philosophers whose lives are ruled by their bodily needs and desires – fail to belong to the class of the divine and hence immortal.<sup>12</sup>

Things only become more problematic in the discussion that follows. In what amounts to a protreptic to philosophy, Socrates maintains that the prize for contemplation is the purification of one's soul, the penalty for a life of bodily pleasure, its corruption. Souls that fail to separate themselves from the body, to the extent possible during life, depart with a corporeal accretion that renders them visible and heavy and condemns them to wander the earth, eventually entering another body (81b-e). Thus, even as Socrates portrays non-philosophical souls as persisting after

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<sup>11</sup> Note the parallel to the Glaucon passage at *Republic* 611b-c.

<sup>12</sup> Tellingly, at 66d, in describing the ways in which the body presents an obstacle to contemplation, Plato describes the would-be philosophers as enslaved (*δουλεύοντες*) to the service of the body.

death, he assigns to them the very corporeal attributes that guarantee their membership in the class of the visible, changeable and perishable. Strikingly, such souls are even described as becoming corporeal (σωματοειδές, 83d5). The argument concludes by hearkening back to Simmias' and Cebes' request that Socrates demonstrate to them that the soul cannot be scattered, but it now makes explicit that his proof depends on the sort of nurture a soul has received: '*From that sort of nurture, there is no danger that it should fear...that on separating from the body it should be torn apart, blown away by the winds and go flying off, and no longer be anything anywhere*' (84b).<sup>13</sup> The Affinity Argument, it turns out, delivers something quite different than was promised: far from showing that all soul is immortal, it implies that most souls are intimately connected to the corporeal realm, and that only philosophical souls properly belong to the class of the immortal.

### 3 Two Senses of Immortality in the *Phaedo*

How, then, are we to address this seeming inconsistency in Plato's position? I propose that it can be resolved if we distinguish two forms of mortality and immortality. On the one hand, all soul in the *Phaedo* is immortal in the sense of being imperishable. On the other hand, in the Affinity Argument, Plato proposes that the philosopher's soul can achieve earned immortality through its contemplation of forms. The Affinity Argument's further implication, that the souls of non-philosophers are mortal, is not in conflict with the rest of the dialogue because two quite different senses of immortality are at work, general and earned immortality. But what evidence do we have that these two senses of immortality are at work? And how does Plato conceive of earned immortality in the *Phaedo*?

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<sup>13</sup> Woolf provides an excellent discussion of the tensions between the Affinity Argument and the rest of the dialogue, though he resolves them along different lines than myself, proposing that Plato is inviting the reader to enter into conversation with the dialogue by comparing and contrasting the arguments (2004: 111-12, n. 19).

We can begin to make the case that there are two senses of immortality at work in the *Phaedo* by contrasting the condition of the soul of the non-philosopher, who is caught in the cycle of rebirth, with that of the philosopher, who escapes it. Both souls are immortal, but their immortality takes on quite different forms. The soul of the philosopher, which avoids the body during life and departs pure, makes its way to Hades, ‘to the invisible, which is like itself, the divine and immortal and wise, and arriving there, it can be happy...and, as is said of the initiates, truly spend the rest of time with the gods’ (81a). By contrast, the soul of the non-philosopher, that is ‘interspersed with the corporeal, with which it has grown together, on account of its communion and intercourse with the body,’ is ‘never able to arrive purely to Hades, but always exits full of body, so that it falls right away back into another body and grows in it as if sown there, and on account of this, it has no part in the communion with the divine and pure and one-in-form’ (81c, 83d-e). Deploying language that is deliberately evocative of religious initiation and apotheosis, Plato suggests that upon death, the soul of the philosopher is able to approach the condition of the gods, to achieve a state of blessed and eternal contemplation.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, souls that depart impure retain a corporeal accretion and an attraction to and identification with the sensible world that condemns them to a cycle of death and reincarnation. On the one hand, these passages make clear that the soul of the non-philosopher is immortal in the sense that it continues to exist after the death of the body. Indeed, it almost immediately adopts another body and with it another corporeal life. At the same time, such a soul’s intimate connection with the sensible world precludes it from the form of immortality that the soul of the philosopher achieves.

Thus far, we have observed that, whereas the soul of the non-philosopher and the soul of the philosopher both persist after the death of the body, their *post mortem* fates are quite different:

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<sup>14</sup> Note that at 81a as well as 82b-c, Plato hints at an affinity principle that he made fully explicit at 67a-b, that in order to consort with the gods, we must approximate their purity.



the former is caught in a cycle of reincarnation, whereas the latter achieves an incorporeal, godlike condition. But are we correct to conclude that two senses of immortality are at work? Our hypothesis receives confirmation from the fact that Plato offers two quite different treatments of death and, correspondingly, of deathlessness (ἀθανασία).<sup>15</sup> In Socrates' defense, he explicitly defines death as the separation of the soul from the body: 'Is [death] anything other than the separation of the soul from the body?' (64c, cf. 67d). In this regard, he describes the soul of the philosopher as experiencing and even welcoming death as an escape from human evils (84a-b).<sup>16</sup> By contrast, in the final argument, Plato argues that insofar as the soul is a principle of life, it cannot undergo death. Its separating from the body is presented as an alternative to its dying. In this context, Plato treats death not as the separation of the soul from the body, but rather as its destruction (105c-7a). According to the Affinity Argument, the souls of non-philosophers are doomed to a cycle of reincarnation. Thus, in our first sense, they undergo death – that is, separation from the body – repeatedly and are mortal; in our second sense, however, they are deathless and hence immortal.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Rowett's chapter in this volume for further discussion of different senses of death and deathlessness in the *Phaedo*. Like myself, Rowett observes that there is a shift in the sense of *death* in the final argument, but she takes it to mean the absence of consciousness and life, whereas I take it to mean destruction.

<sup>16</sup> Note that the subject of the entire passage at 84a-b is the philosopher's soul (ψυχή ἀνδρὸς φιλοσόφου); there is no shift in subject when Plato describes the soul as living and dying at 84b1-2. Similarly, at 77d, Plato claims that it is necessary for the soul to continue to exist when it dies (ἐπειδὴν ἀποθάνη εἶναι), and at 80e-1a, he refers to the soul as practicing dying easily. When Cebes develops his weaver objection in response to Socrates, he appears to understand Socrates' discussion of metempsychosis as implying that the soul is born and dies many times (88a); his worry is that in one of these deaths, the soul may perish. It is perhaps in response to Cebes' distinction between dying and perishing that Plato introduces a new definition of death at 91d: 'this is death, the destruction of the soul.'

<sup>17</sup> In this context, it is interesting to observe that, while at 80d, Plato equates Hades with the invisible realm of forms to which the philosopher's soul makes its way upon death, in the final argument, he claims that 'the soul is immortal and indestructible and our souls will truly exist in Hades' (106e-7a), apparently treating Hades as the realm that all souls occupy after death.

I have made the case that there are two forms of immortality at work in the *Phaedo*: whereas all souls are immortal in the sense of being indestructible, the philosopher's soul can achieve a further, earned form of immortality. How does Plato conceive of it? We can answer this question by taking a closer look at the mechanism by which the philosopher achieves earned immortality. According to the Affinity Argument, the philosopher achieves immortality as a result of his contemplation of forms. In particular, should he succeed in maximally dissociating his soul from his body, his soul will become akin to the forms and hence able to grasp them (67a-b, 79c-d). As a result of his contemplation, the soul of the philosopher not only enters into the realm of the forms, but, further, it appears to assimilate to them. In particular, Plato emphasizes that his soul assimilates to their changelessness: 'it ceases from its wandering and, in relation to these things, it is always the same and stable, because it is in contact with such things' (79d). Why does Plato emphasize that the soul assimilates to the changelessness of the forms? Here, it will be helpful to look forward to the *Timaeus*. In the *Timaeus*, Plato develops a contrast between the eternity of the forms, which exist outside of time, with the immortality of generated beings, which exist within time (37d-8c). Crucially, Plato emphasizes that the forms are eternal in virtue of the fact that they are unchanging, whereas generated beings, as subject to change, are only capable of a second-rate form of immortality, persistence in time. My proposal, then, is that the philosopher's earned immortality consists not merely in his soul's persistence in time, but in the changelessness it acquires as a result of its assimilation to the forms he contemplates; in what follows, I refer to this condition as changeless eternity. It is starkly opposed to the condition of the soul that is condemned to the cycle of life, death and rebirth, a soul that is quasi-corporeal and subject to endless change.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Compare Sami Yli-Karjanmaa's discussion in this volume of reincarnation and immortality in *Philo*.

#### 4 An Apparent Inconsistency in the *Symposium*

With this understanding of the role of earned immortality in the *Phaedo* in place, we can now turn to our puzzle in the *Symposium*. In a *volte-face* that has long taxed interpreters, in the flux passage of the *Symposium*, Plato appears to temporarily abandon his commitment to the immortality of the soul. In this passage, Diotima provides a general characterization of mortal nature as subject to constant flux, and hence as incapable of true immortality and condemned to a second-best approximation to it, namely reproduction. As I devote considerable attention to this passage, I will begin by quoting it in its entirety:

Well, she said, if you agree that by its nature, love is of what we have often agreed it is of, then do not wonder. For the same account applies to animals as to humans: mortal nature seeks as far as possible to always exist and to be immortal. But it is only able in this manner, through generation, because it always leaves behind another new thing in exchange for the old. For even in the time in which each living being is said to live and to be the same – like how a person is called the same from childhood until he becomes an old man – he is called the same while never being made up of the same things, but while always being both renewed and destroyed<sup>19</sup> in his hair, his flesh, his bones, his blood and his whole body. And this is not just the case with the body, but also with the soul: its manners, customs, beliefs, desires, pleasures, pains, fears, none of these is ever the same in anyone, but some are coming into existence and others are being destroyed. It's even stranger than this with knowledge: not only do some pieces of knowledge come to exist in us while others are destroyed, so that we are never the same even in terms of our knowledge, but every single piece of knowledge undergoes the same process. For what we call 'going over things' exists because knowledge is leaving us. For forgetting is the departure of knowledge, while going over something creates in us a new memory to replace the one that is departing, thereby preserving the piece of knowledge, so that it appears to be the same. In this way all that is mortal is preserved, not by being always completely the same like the divine, but because what is departing and aging leaves behind in us another new thing that is like it was. It is in this manner, Socrates, she said, that the mortal partakes of immortality, both in body and in everything else, but the immortal does so in another way. So don't wonder if everything by nature honors its offspring, for this eagerness, this love, which attends every creature is for the sake of immortality. (207c-8b)

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<sup>19</sup> The Greek participle (ἀπολλύς) is active and so the more literal meaning is that the body is always 'losing' parts of itself.

Several things are troubling about this passage. In the first place, the passage draws a sharp distinction between mortal nature and the divine. Mortal nature is able to persist only by replenishing itself during this life and, after death, through a parallel process of replacing itself with its offspring. However, the strong implication is that this is not a genuine form of immortality—the concluding contrast between how the *mortal* and the *immortal* partake of immortality is surely loaded. The immortal partakes of immortality by remaining forever the same; the passage appears to identify this with genuine immortality and to claim that humans are incapable of this form of immortality. In a similar vein, at 206c, Plato refers to reproduction as an immortal thing *for a mortal creature* (ἐν θνητῷ); at 206e, he describes reproduction as something immortal *as far as can be the case for something mortal* (ὡς θνητῷ); and at 207d, he describes mortal nature as seeking *as far as possible* (κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν) to be immortal. Plato could not be more explicit in maintaining that, though humans may aspire to immortality, they remain resolutely mortal.

In the second place, the passage advances this conclusion by drawing a troubling parallel between the body and the soul. Just as the body is never composed of the same material parts, but must constantly replenish itself, so the soul is never composed of the same psychic elements, but must constantly regenerate itself. Contrast this with the opposition Plato develops between body and soul in the *Phaedo*, where the soul is placed in the class of the changeless, the body in the class of the changeable (80a-b). The implication of the flux passage is that the soul, like the body, is incapable of true immortality, which requires that it always remain the same; to the extent that it is capable of immortality, it is only capable of a second-rate sort, through constantly regenerating itself.

Numerous interpreters have resisted this conclusion. Thus, Dover, for example, maintains that the passage only claims that psychic states are subject to flux, and that it allows for the possibility that the soul itself, as the subject of psychic states, is unchanging and immortal.<sup>20</sup> However, such a maneuver is rendered implausible by the studious parallel the passage develops between body and soul.<sup>21</sup> Plato first claims that each human ‘is called the same while never being made up of the same things, but while always being both renewed and destroyed in his hair, his flesh, his bones, his blood and his whole body.’ The body clearly is not on all fours with the other items in this list: it is not as though the human is renewed and destroyed in his hair and flesh and, in addition to these, in his body. Rather, ‘and’ (καί) here has a summative force: the items preceding the body in this list are constituents of the body. In virtue of the fact that they are subject to destruction and renewal, the body as a whole is subject to flux. Plato continues: ‘And this is not just the case with the body, but also with the soul (καί μὴ ὅτι κατὰ τὸ σῶμα, ἀλλὰ καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν): its manners, customs, beliefs, desires, pleasures, pains, fears, none of these is ever the same in anyone, but some are coming into existence and others are being destroyed.’ Plato’s use of the phrase καί μὴ ὅτι κατὰ τὸ σῶμα, ἀλλὰ καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν is significant. It indicates that whatever he has just established in the case of the body also applies in the case of the soul. What he has just established about the body is that it is never strictly the same due to the flux of its constituents. It follows that what Plato is claiming about the soul is that it is never strictly the same due to the flux of its manners, customs, beliefs etc. The reason the flux of the human’s hair, flesh and bones entails that his body is never the same is that his body is made up of these elements;

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<sup>20</sup> Dover 1987: 149; see also Dover 1965: 19-20, Ademollo 2018: 54-5, O’Brien 1984: 195, and Price 2004: 30. Morgan 1990: 92-3, Robinson 1995: 126-7, Rowe 1998: 185 and Sedley 2009: 159-60, following Luce 1952, make a related argument, that Plato is only denying that human nature, i.e. the soul-body composite, is immortal, and does not deny the immortality of the soul itself.

<sup>21</sup> See Sheffield 2006: 147-8, n. 47.

by analogy, the reason the human's soul is never the same is that it is composed of mental states that are subject to flux.

Our passage concludes: 'In this way all that is mortal is preserved, not by being always completely the same like the divine, but because what is departing and aging leaves behind in us another new thing that is like it was. It is in this manner, Socrates, she said, that the mortal partakes of immortality, both in body and in everything else, but the immortal does so in another way.' Interpreters such as Dover insist that in the final sentence, Plato does not place the soul in the class of the mortal; instead it belongs to that of the immortal. But note the parallels between the final sentence and its predecessor: whatever belongs to the class of the immortal in the final sentence belongs to the class of the divine in that which precedes it. Thus, on my opponents' line of interpretation, the souls of humans and other animals would not just be immortal, but also divine. But that would be extremely jarring in a dialogue in which Plato has been at pains to emphasize the chasm that separates the human from the divine (e.g. 202e-203a). Furthermore, the phrase 'everything else' in the concluding sentence clearly refers to the mental states that Plato has just characterized as subject to flux. But how can the soul belong to the class of the divine and unchanging if its mental states are mortal and subject to flux?<sup>22</sup>

Finally, on the alternative interpretation, Plato's argumentative structure, both within this passage and, more broadly, throughout Diotima's speech, begins to fall apart. On my reading, the argumentative structure of this passage is as follows. Plato claims that living beings can only achieve immortality through reproduction. He supports this by an analogy to the way in which they count as persisting within a given life: just as the organism only persists within a given life

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<sup>22</sup> Thus, the tension I am exploring still obtains, even on those interpretations that deny that the soul is composed of its mental states: even if the soul is a persisting and distinct subject of mental states, the mere fact that its mental states undergo constant flux suffices to demonstrate that the soul does not remain 'always completely the same' (208a8), and hence is not immortal.

through regeneration, so it only persists across lives by reproduction. He supports the first part of this analogy by arguing that the organism, the soul-body composite, maintains its existence within a given life through regenerating both its somatic and its psychic constituents. If mental states were not psychic constituents, and if the soul were, instead, some unchanging subject of these mental states, then it is utterly unclear what Plato would be accomplishing by including the claim that mental states are subject to flux, and, indeed, by presenting it as a parallel claim to that concerning the body's constituents. In what follows, Plato argues that we are capable of immortality through two sorts of pregnancy and reproduction: somatic and psychic. If the soul is not composed of its mental states and hence is not subject to flux, but is rather an unchanging subject of mental states, then why ever would humans pursue psychic reproduction? They would already be guaranteed immortality via the persistence of their changeless souls.<sup>23</sup>

In sum: the flux passage implies that, just as the perishing of flesh and blood renders our bodies mortal, so the perishing of thoughts and desires renders our souls mortal. But this proposal, that the soul is mortal, stands in obvious conflict with Plato's arguments for the immortality of all soul in dialogues ranging from the *Phaedo* through the *Phaedrus*. How, then, are we to rescue Plato from the appearance of gross inconsistency?

## 5 Immortality as Changelessness in the *Symposium*

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<sup>23</sup> One ground for rejecting the interpretation that I have outlined is that the proposal that the soul is composed of its mental states might seem to be at odds with the status of the soul as the persisting subject of its mental states—see, e.g., Ademollo 2018: 52-5, Dover 1965: 19 and Price 2004: 24-5. However, this need not follow: as Quinton notes, on a bundle theory of the mind, the subject might, quite minimally, be the interrelated set of mental states (2008: 55-7). Thus, this objection would only have force if we had decisive evidence that Plato subscribes to a Berkeleyan view on which whatever is the subject of mental states cannot itself be a set of mental states. However, there is no direct evidence that he is committed to this thesis; indeed, the fact that he uses phrases such as *nous* and *dianoia* to refer both to the capacity for thought and to thought itself suggests that he draws no such sharp distinction.

In what follows, I will argue that the traditional problem concerning immortality in the *Symposium* is, simply put, misplaced. To see why this is so, we should consider more carefully what form of immortality Plato is denying to human soul in the flux passage. The argumentative structure of the passage is, on the face of it, puzzling. Plato begins by stating that mortal nature is only capable of immortality through reproduction ‘because it always leaves behind another new thing in exchange for the old’ (207d). He then provides a lengthy explanation for why this should be so: it is because ‘even in the time in which each living being is said to live and to be the same...he is called the same while never being made up of the same things, but while always being both renewed and destroyed’ (207d); Plato goes on to explain, in detail, how this continuous destruction and regeneration applies to both our somatic and psychic constituents. But why should the fact that, during a given life, we can only maintain our continued existence by regenerating ourselves entail that the only sort of immortality we are capable of involves replacing ourselves after death through our offspring? Why might our souls not, instead, persist after the death of the body by continuing to replenish their psychological states? The force of Plato’s reasoning becomes apparent if we turn to the conclusion of his argument: ‘In this way all that is mortal is preserved, *not by being always completely the same* like the divine, but because what is departing and aging leaves behind in us another new thing that is like it was.’<sup>24</sup> It is in this manner ... that the mortal partakes of immortality, both in body and in everything else, but the immortal does so in another way’ (208a-b). The reason that Plato draws attention to the flux that characterizes mortal beings

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<sup>24</sup> I understand Plato to be claiming in this passage that the gods are immortal in virtue of being qualitatively unchanged across time. That *παντάπασιν τὸ αὐτὸ ἀεὶ εἶναι* (‘being always completely the same’) is referring to the gods’ qualitative identity, and not merely their numerical identity, is indicated by Plato’s use of the intensifier, *παντάπασιν*: whereas numerical identity does not admit of degree, qualitative identity does. Furthermore, the context implies a contrast between how gods and how humans achieve immortality, where the human mode involves constant change; the implication is that the divine mode does not.



such as ourselves is that it entails that we are incapable of a very specific form of immortality, ‘being always absolutely the same.’ Given that we are subject to flux in both body and soul, and must rely on replenishment to maintain our continued existence, there is no hope that upon death we should be able to achieve what I have referred to as changeless eternity.

But, as we have seen, changeless eternity is not the only way that Plato thinks of immortality; thus, to deny that the soul is capable of changeless eternity is not tantamount to denying that it is capable of general immortality, i.e. persistence in time. In fact, there are several ways in which a soul might realize general immortality. On the one hand, it might persist through time in virtue of being caught in an endless cycle of change—of regeneration and reproduction, as Plato outlines in the *Symposium*, or of birth, death and rebirth, as he suggests in the *Phaedo*. On the other hand, it might persist in virtue of remaining the same forever. This is the form of immortality that we encountered in the Affinity Argument, the earned immortality in which the philosopher’s soul assimilates to the forms. It is this form of immortality, not general immortality, that Plato is concerned to deny to human soul in the flux passage.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, if the flux passage does not contradict Plato’s arguments for general immortality in other dialogues, then we might wonder why Plato should emphasize in the *Symposium* that mortal nature seeks to achieve immortality through reproduction. If we are already guaranteed persistence in time, then why bother? I can see at least two ways of addressing this concern. First, in describing the mortal pursuit of immortality, Plato is attempting to give an explanation of the behavior of *hoi polloi*; it need not follow that he considers their behavior to be rationally justifiable (see my 2010). Perhaps the best explanation we can offer of the human drive to reproduce in body or in soul is that for many this seems like the closest they can come to cheating death. Second, Plato maintains that the reason we wish for immortality is to secure eternal possession of the good. But it is not clear that the form of immortality that he argues for in other dialogues is sufficiently psychologically robust to satisfy this desire. If my soul persists after my death as a sort of imperishable psychic stuff, and then assumes a new life in a new body with little or no recollection of my previous existence, then it is not at all clear that this should reassure me, as the person I am now, that I will continue to possess the good after death (see Rowe 1996: 9-10). In that case, reproductive immortality might seem to offer a better, or at least complementary, path towards achieving eternal possession of the good.

Why the focus on changeless eternity? The reason for this is that the topic of the dialogue is *eros*, construed as the pursuit of happiness, *eudaimonia*.<sup>26</sup> *Eudaimonia*, in turn, is defined as eternal possession of the good (202c, 204e, 205a, 206a, 207a). Commentators have long worried that Plato performs a philosophical *legerdemain* in moving from the claim at 205a, that humans always want to possess the good, to the claim at 206a that humans want to possess the good always—i.e. to possess the good into eternity.<sup>27</sup> This progression is less troubling if we attend to the dialogue’s emphasis on the role of *eros* in bringing humankind into relation to the divine. Thus, Socrates’ exchange with Diotima begins by establishing that, while Eros is not a god, he is a spirit, whose function is to bind together the mortal and the divine (202d-3a). If we think of gods as beings in the best possible condition, then it should seem a natural continuation of Plato’s eudaimonism that our *telos* (end) should be, as Plato’s followers maintained, ὁμοίωσις θεῶν κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν (assimilation to god to the degree possible).<sup>28</sup> But part and parcel of the gods’ blessedness is that they do not just possess what is beautiful and good (202c), but that they possess it forever and unchangingly. On this account, it is not sufficient for happiness that one should possess the good or that one should exist forever; what is required is that one possess the good forever—in other words, what is required is changeless eternity in possession of the good.<sup>29</sup> It is for this reason that, in the *Republic*, Plato is scandalized by depictions of the gods as subject to

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<sup>26</sup> Sheffield 2012 has an excellent discussion of this point.

<sup>27</sup> See Dover 1987: 144, Price 2004: 17, Sheffield 2006: 81-2.

<sup>28</sup> See Annas’ 1999 and Sedley’s 1999 seminal discussions.

<sup>29</sup> One might object that the gods only need changelessness in one respect, in their possession of the good; change in other respects would not compromise their happiness. However, in the *Republic* passage that I go on to discuss, Plato seems to suggest that were the gods to change at all, they would enter into a worse condition (380c-1e). This implies that Plato assumes that there is only one best condition for the gods to be in, and that to undergo any change whatsoever would compromise their blessedness. It is worth noting that, while in later dialogues, such as the *Timaeus* and *Laws*, Plato depicts the cosmic gods as subject to change, he presents them as subject to maximally stable forms of change, rotation and revolution, because he continues to associate changelessness with perfection (*Timaeus* 40a-b, *Laws* 898a-b).

change (380c-1e). As beings that are perfect, and hence in the best possible condition, were they to change, they would voluntarily enter into a worse condition, a psychological impossibility. Thus, the reason that Plato specifies in the flux passage that gods enjoy changeless eternity is because this is the only form of immortality that will ensure them eternal possession of the good.

In sum, given the eudaimonist focus of the *Symposium*, it is only changeless eternity that is relevant to Plato's argumentative purposes. The form of immortality that Plato assigns to all soul in other dialogues – persistence in time – is simply beside the point. A soul that is subject to an endless cycle of birth, death, punishment and rebirth is simply not the sort of thing to attain the form of immortality – changeless eternity – that enables man to approximate the condition of the gods and achieve permanent possession of the good.

#### 6 Earned Immortality in the *Symposium*

While our discussion may have removed the appearance of conflict between the flux passage and Plato's arguments for general immortality in other dialogues, it gives rise to a different, and I believe more interesting problem for Plato: to what degree is he confident, in the *Symposium*, that the philosopher can attain earned immortality, that is, changeless eternity? To answer this, we must first address the question of how, exactly, earned immortality is supposed to be achieved in the *Symposium*. At the conclusion of the ascent, Plato writes: 'Or don't you realize that only there, seeing the beautiful with that by which he ought to see it, will it be possible for him to give birth, not to images of virtue, because he is not in touch with images, but to true virtue, because he is in touch with the truth. And giving birth to true virtue, and nourishing it, it will belong to him to become god-loved and, if indeed to anyone, to become immortal' (212a). In this passage, Plato describes a very specific sequence of events: the philosopher grasps the form of beauty and, as a result, is able to give birth to true virtue, become god-loved and, possibly, immortal. But the

passage does not make clear the connection between these events: what is it that causes the philosopher to possibly become immortal? On the face of it, his immortality might appear to be related to his giving birth: thus, one popular interpretive proposal is that at the culmination of the ascent, the philosopher attains immortality through his moral and intellectual progeny, by transmitting his virtue and wisdom to the souls of his students.<sup>30</sup> But this suggestion will not do. For if the philosopher achieves only reproductive immortality at the culmination of the ascent, then his condition will be no improvement over that of the lower lovers; he, too, will fail to secure eternal possession of the good for *himself* – the stated goal of *eros* – but will achieve only some metaphorical cousin of happiness, in which he has some causal connection to *others*' attainment of happiness. But in describing the ascent as the 'final and highest mysteries, for which the [lower mysteries] are done' (210a), Plato sets up an expectation that the philosopher should secure a consummation of *eros* superior to that of the lower lovers.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, as several interpreters have noted, there is simply no mention in the text of the philosopher giving birth to virtue in someone else. On the contrary, there is every indication that he is no longer especially concerned with the education of young minds: whereas at 210c, the lover is described as seeking to improve the soul of his beloved, by 210e, the beloved seems to have completely disappeared. Indeed, at 211c, the beloved is described as a step (ἐπαναβασμός) that the lover climbs over to reach the form of beauty, and at 211d-e, Plato emphasizes that, having grasped the form of beauty, the initiate no

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<sup>30</sup> Notably Price 2004: 49-54. Nightingale 2017 makes a related proposal, that the philosopher's immortality is due to his initiating a chain of discourse.

<sup>31</sup> In the following section, I will argue that Plato has significant reservations about whether even the philosophical initiate who comes to grasp the form will attain changeless eternity. However, even if Plato is skeptical on that count, on the interpretation I go on to offer – according to which the philosopher's grasp of the form imparts a certain degree of changelessness to his soul – we can at least see why one might hope that this would give his soul changeless immortality. By contrast, if the philosopher is simply creating psychic offspring in others, then the final mysteries would not even suggest a path by which he might attain true immortality and bring *eros* to fruition.

longer sees human beauty as truly worthwhile, but rather as ‘mortal nonsense’ (φλυαρία θνητή; cf. 211a).<sup>32</sup>

But if his purpose is not to imply that the philosopher, like the lower lovers, achieves reproductive immortality, then why should Plato portray the philosopher as giving birth to virtue? To answer this, we should recall that the goal of *eros* is not immortality for its own sake, but eternal possession of the good. What sort of good could Plato have in mind in the *Symposium* when he defines happiness as eternal possession of the good? It takes little prompting to recognize that, for Plato, the greatest good is virtue. Thus, the reason that Plato portrays the philosopher as giving birth to virtue in himself is that it is only through becoming good – that is, virtuous – that the philosopher can truly come to possess the good.<sup>33</sup> One might worry that this misinterprets the goal of the philosopher’s *eros*; after all, the overwhelming focus of the ascent is not so much on the philosopher’s development of virtue as on his quest to understand beauty. But this problem disappears if we recognize that the form of virtue Plato has in mind at the culmination of the ascent is wisdom.<sup>34</sup> To grasp the form simply is to become wise; thus, there is no need to choose between the sight of the form and the development of virtue as the *telos* of the ascent, nor is there any puzzle as to why the philosopher’s grasp of the form should cause him to give birth to virtue.

But this still leaves us with the question of how the philosopher can achieve not just possession of the good, but eternal possession of it. In other words, how does the philosopher become immortal? We might begin to answer this question by noting that Plato’s description of

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<sup>32</sup> For further arguments against the claim that the philosophical initiate achieves immortality by proxy, see O’Brien (1984: 196-9), Sedley (2009: 160) and Sheffield (2006: 146).

<sup>33</sup> See Sheffield 2006: 120, 134.

<sup>34</sup> This assumption receives strong support from the striking parallels between *Symposium* 212a and *Republic* 490a-b. In the *Republic* passage, the philosopher’s grasp of the forms results in his giving birth to intelligence and truth. Sedley defends the assumption that the virtue in question is purely intellectual through a careful comparison of the *Symposium* to the *Timaeus* (2017: 104-5); see also Sheffield 2006: 134.

the form of beauty in the ascent strikingly draws attention to its changeless eternity. He begins by observing that the form always is, and does not come into being or cease to exist, wax or wane (211a). He then adds that it is unqualifiedly beautiful: it does not appear ugly at any time, in relation to any *comparandum*, context or perceiver; its beauty is, therefore, immune to change. What Plato is emphasizing is that the form possesses exactly the form of immortality that he attributes to the gods and denies to mortals in the flux passage.<sup>35</sup> This, in turn, suggests that the philosopher's soul, to the extent that it is able to become immortal, owes its immortality to that of the forms that he contemplates. This suggestion, that the philosopher's immortality is somehow indebted to that of the forms, receives confirmation from our discussion of the *Phaedo*. In the Affinity Argument, the philosopher's soul is able to achieve changeless eternity precisely because the objects that it contemplates, forms, are stable and unchanging (79d). We see exactly the same idea in other dialogues. In the *Republic*, Plato writes that 'the philosopher, having communion with what is divine and ordered becomes as ordered and divine as a human can be' (500c-d)—the condition of the philosopher's soul is a direct product of that of the forms that he grasps. Later, in the Glaucus passage, Plato suggests that the soul can only achieve its truest nature, and with it an effortless form of immortality, in light of its relation to the forms; Plato's description of the forms as 'divine, immortal and always existing,' and of the soul as akin (συγγενής) to them suggests that its immortality is parasitic upon theirs (611e). In the *Timaeus*, Plato writes that 'if a man has seriously devoted himself to love of learning and true wisdom, and if he has exercised these parts of himself most of all, then it is absolutely necessary for him to think immortal and divine thoughts, if indeed he is grasping truth, and as far as is permitted for human nature to partake of immortality, he will not fall short of this by even a measure' (90b-c; cf. 47b-c). In this passage,

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<sup>35</sup> See also Lear 2006: 114-16.

the immortality that the philosopher achieves is a direct product of the immortal nature of his thoughts. Finally, in the *Phaedrus*, it is the soul's grasp of the immortal forms that enables it to sustain its incorporeal existence, in virtue of which it qualifies as truly immortal, and not as a component of a composite, mortal being (246e, 249c).

Suppose that the philosopher's soul owes its immortality to that of the forms that it contemplates. How, exactly, does their immortality 'rub off' onto him? Plato's position is difficult to reconstruct, and my account can only be conjectural. Clearly Plato has in mind some sort of view according to which knowledge involves the assimilation of knower to known. But can we say more than that? One clue lies in the flux passage. As we saw, in that passage, Plato develops a parallel between body and soul: just as the body is composed of flesh, blood and bones, so the soul is composed of its mental states.<sup>36</sup> But if the soul is made up of its mental states, then we can see how the eternity of the forms might rub off onto the philosopher. The forms, according to Plato, are unchanging and stable; a full cognitive grasp of them, in turn, yields a condition, wisdom, that is unchanging and stable, both because its truth value is not contextually variable and because it is not liable to be contradicted or abandoned. If the philosopher's wisdom is a constituent of his soul, then the stability and changelessness of its objects will be imparted directly to his soul.<sup>37</sup> If we add to this the assumption that the soul is imperishable – defended by Plato in other dialogues

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<sup>36</sup> Readers who instead take the soul to be the subject of its mental states might accept the following, modified version, of the argument that I go on to advance. If the soul is the subject of its mental states, then its being changeful or changeless consists in its mental states changing or remaining stable. Thus, for the soul to be changeless, its mental states must be changeless; in what follows, I propose that this is what knowledge of the forms effects.

<sup>37</sup> Of course, to the extent that one's soul is composed of eternally true knowledge, it may fail to differ from the souls of other philosophers (especially if we assume that Plato is a coherentist about knowledge, such that it would be impossible to have a full understanding of one form in isolation from understanding all the others). In that case, the form of immortality that Plato envisions here, in which one's soul is composed of a set of eternally true beliefs, might strike some as overly impersonal. I doubt, however, that Plato would find it problematic. For further discussion see Gerson's chapter below.

– then the conclusion will be that, should the soul come to know the forms, it will achieve changeless eternity.<sup>38</sup>

### 7 Skepticism about Earned Immortality in the *Symposium*

But this brings us to what I take to be the fundamental puzzle concerning immortality in the *Symposium*. At the same time as Plato sketches out how the philosopher's grasp of the form might cause his soul to assimilate to its immortal nature, he reveals significant doubts about whether this is in fact something that any human can hope to achieve. These doubts are highlighted at the conclusion of the ascent. Rather than confidently affirm that the philosopher shall become immortal, he writes that he shall become immortal εἴπερ τῷ ἄλλῳ ἀνθρώπων, if indeed any human can (212a).<sup>39</sup> If the philosopher fails to achieve changeless eternity, then he will fail to achieve true happiness and fall short of the goal of *eros*. Thus, if Plato were confident about the philosopher's prospects of becoming immortal, he would not use this qualified phrasing; his purpose appears to be to sketch out what the philosopher hopes to achieve through his grasp of the forms, while at the same time raising significant doubts about his odds of achieving it. We see these same doubts developed in the flux passage, when Plato claims that human soul, by its very nature, is incapable of stability. Thus, for the philosopher to achieve changelessness, he would have to transcend his human nature and become, as it were, divine. Earlier in the *Symposium*, Plato argues that *eros* is conditional upon lack; those secure in their possession of the good would cease to experience *eros* (200a). In this regard, he argues that the gods are beings beyond *eros*

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<sup>38</sup> Thus, even if we assume that all souls are eternal in the sense that they persist in time, only those souls that grasp the forms have the potential to achieve changeless eternity. Souls that are composed of mere beliefs fail to achieve any sort of cognitive stability, since their beliefs are liable to be contradicted and abandoned; as a result, even if the soul persists in time, it does not remain the same.

<sup>39</sup> O'Brien (1984: 197-8, n. 34) argues that in this context εἴπερ τῷ ἄλλῳ does not have a concessive sense, so much as an emphatic sense: the philosopher, more than anyone, will become immortal. However, as O'Brien himself observes, Plato's earlier concessive phrasings, such as 207d1, support taking εἴπερ τῷ ἄλλῳ as having a concessive sense in this context.



(202c-d; cf. 204a); by contrast at 205a, he claims that all humans are subject to *eros* for possessing the good. Thus, were the philosopher to succeed in achieving eternal possession of the good, he would cease to be human and assume quasi-divine status. But while Plato frequently portrays assimilation to god (ὁμοίωσις θεῶ) as the human *telos*, he invariably adds the qualification ‘to the extent possible’ (κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν), suggesting that wholesale divinization is simply not possible for humans.<sup>40</sup>

What are Plato’s grounds for doubt? On the one hand, his interrelated portrayal of Eros and Socrates suggests significant skepticism regarding our prospects of coming to know the forms. Plato writes that Eros is neither mortal nor immortal, but is constantly being born, dying and being reborn; that is, he is subject to flux and incapable of unchanging eternity. He adds that Eros is between knowledge and ignorance: while the gods possess all that is good and are hence wise, Eros is incapable of wisdom (204a-b). As such, Eros is doomed to be a *philosophos*—one who loves wisdom but, as a precondition of his love, can never achieve it. These facets of Eros are non-accidentally related: it is because Eros is incapable of wisdom that he is incapable of true immortality and is subject to flux. But to the extent that Eros is a *philosophos*, this suggests that the philosopher, too, is one who cannot hope to achieve full wisdom or immortality. As many commentators have noticed, Plato is at pains in his portrayal of Socrates – poor, unshod, stopping on people’s doorsteps, self-avowedly amorous and ignorant – to suggest that he is to be identified with the spirit, Eros.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps we are meant to conclude that even Socrates is incapable of completing the ascent, of grasping the form and achieving permanent possession of the good. In fact, I believe that Plato is deliberately ambiguous concerning Socrates’ epistemic state: passages such as 177d suggest, by contrast, that he has completed the *erōtika* and gained knowledge of the

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<sup>40</sup> See, e.g. *Republic* 613b, *Theaetetus* 176b, *Timaeus* 90c.

<sup>41</sup> E.g. Benardete 1993: 67, Bury 1932: xlvi, lxii, Nehamas 1999: 312.

form.<sup>42</sup> But this, in turn, gives rise to a distinct, and perhaps more troubling reason for doubt. Even if Socrates has completed the ascent, far from transcending *eros*, he appears to continue to thirst after knowledge. He is famously depicted as cycling in and out of contemplative trances (175b, 220c); the implication is that, even if Socrates can grasp the form, his grasp is only partial and sporadic. Far from achieving stable possession of the good, his knowledge is constantly escaping him and requiring replenishment.

Thus, even if Plato believes that knowledge of the form is something that a human can hope to achieve, he suggests that such knowledge may not, in fact, possess the stability that would be required for it to render the philosopher's soul unchangingly immortal.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Plato raises precisely these doubts about the stability of knowledge in the flux passage. After describing how mortal nature is subject to flux in both body and soul, in an apparently unmotivated aside, he adds that the same account applies to knowledge. Just as our psychic states come into existence and cease to exist, so, too, some knowledge comes into existence in our souls while other knowledge is destroyed. But the instability of knowledge runs deeper than that. For even if we consider a given piece of knowledge that appears to be constant and unchanging, in fact, Plato reveals, it only maintains this appearance through a process of going over (*μελετᾶν*), in which old memories are replaced with new ones; the knowledge is preserved 'in such a manner that it *seems* to be the same' (208a). It emerges that knowledge has no more stability than our hair or toenails: it appears to be the same, but is rather an interconnected series of memories. This is, in fact, a deeply startling claim for Plato to make, given that in other dialogues, its stability is the defining feature of

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<sup>42</sup> For an argument that Socrates has not completed the ascent, see Sheffield 2006: 196, n. 27.

<sup>43</sup> As I go on to argue, in dialogues both preceding and following the *Symposium*, stability is a defining feature of knowledge. Thus, we might have reason to wonder whether the form of knowledge under discussion in Diotima's speech—liable to being forgotten and requiring constant replenishment—even deserves to be called knowledge.

knowledge. In the *Meno*, Plato famously distinguishes knowledge from true belief because knowledge is such as to remain fixed whereas true belief is liable to wander (97e-8a). This imagery is picked up in the *Protagoras*, when Plato contrasts the power of appearance, which causes the soul to wander (ἐπλάννα), with the measuring art, which gives it stillness (ἡσυχία, 356d-e). Likewise, in the Affinity Argument of the *Phaedo*, Plato calls wisdom the state of the soul when it is always the same and stable because it is in touch with forms (79d). And in the *Timaeus*, Plato contrasts intelligence with true belief, since it is unmoved (ἀκίνητον) by persuasion (51e).<sup>44</sup> Given that Plato repeatedly defines knowledge in terms of its stability, his claim in the *Symposium* that knowledge is subject to flux is striking.

What are Plato's reasons for doubting that the philosopher can achieve stable knowledge and with it, changeless eternity and happiness? In general terms, these doubts stem from a growing awareness of the extreme ontological chasm that separates the philosopher's merely human soul from the forms that it contemplates. In the Affinity Argument of the *Phaedo* we saw Plato divide reality into two kinds and place the philosopher's body on the side of the perceptible and the mortal, his soul on the side of the imperceptible and eternal forms. It is the kinship of the soul to the forms that undergirds its immortality in the *Phaedo*. By contrast, in the *Symposium*, Plato is at pains to emphasize the chasm separating mortal soul and immortal forms. The form is presented as radically separated from the spatiotemporal realm; it does not appear in the guise of anything belonging to body or soul (211a), but exists apart from 'mortal nonsense,' impassive and

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<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting that different, though interrelated, forms of stability appear to be at work in these passages. Thus, in the *Meno* and *Timaeus*, knowledge is stable in the sense that it is not liable to be abandoned; the *Phaedo* draws focus to the way in which knowledge is a stable condition of the soul, i.e. one in which the soul is relatively immune to change. This parallels the two forms of instability that Plato attributes to knowledge in the flux passage: on the one hand, much knowledge simply departs from the soul (207e5-8a2); on the other hand, even knowledge that appears to be constant fails to constitute a single, unchanging psychic state, but rather amounts to a series of memories (208a1-7).

unaffected. As we have seen, this ontological divide gives us reason to question – perhaps along the lines that Plato develops in the *Parmenides* (133b-4e) – whether the human soul, situated as it is in space and time, is really the sort of thing that could grasp forms. In what way could a soul like ours grasp an object that is so radically different in kind from itself? Furthermore, as the flux passage and the portrayal of Socrates suggest, even if we could grasp the forms, it is not clear that we could sustain this grasp; our knowledge would always be flowing out of us, subject to replenishment and at risk of being forgotten altogether.<sup>45</sup> But a final, and most significant, ground for doubt arises from consideration of the nature of knowledge itself. If knowledge consisted in a direct and unmediated grasp of the form, then perhaps we might have reason to hope that this would cause knower to assimilate to known, the immortality of the form to rub off onto the soul of the philosopher. But at 211a, Plato draws a significant distinction. He writes, ‘Nor will the beautiful appear to him in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body, or any argument (λόγος) or knowledge.’ Part of the philosopher’s knowledge of the form appears to be a recognition that the form is fundamentally different from his cognitive representation of it; his knowledge of the form is a mere representation of the form and as such belongs to the world of becoming, separated from its object by the ontological chasm that he has now come to recognize. Paradoxically, the very separation of the form that ensures its unchangingly eternity, and thereby offers the philosopher the hope of earned immortality, precludes the philosopher’s soul from fully assimilating to it (211b). But in that case, even if the philosopher could come to know the form, he would have no reason to think that its unchanging nature could rub off onto what is, in the end, merely a human mind.

## 8 Later Developments

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<sup>45</sup> See also Nightingale 2017: 144-5.

What we have uncovered so far is that there is a significant shift in Plato's position on earned immortality between the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium*.<sup>46</sup> In the *Phaedo*, Plato is confident that the soul is akin to the forms, and that contemplation of forms can cause the soul to assimilate to their unchanging eternity. By contrast, in the *Symposium*, Plato treats the soul as subject to flux and places it on the side of becoming; his awareness of the ontological chasm between the soul and the forms leads him to doubt that the philosopher's grasp of the form could cause his soul fully to assimilate to its changeless eternity. This realization leaves Plato with three philosophical alternatives. He can embrace the skepticism about earned immortality that he develops in the *Symposium*. He can attempt to bring the forms back to earth, as it were, reducing the separation between the forms and human souls so that we might hope fully to assimilate to them. And finally, he could downgrade the requirements for earned immortality. Following the *Symposium*, it is the last of these alternatives that Plato adopts.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, in dialogues such as the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*, Plato remains emphatic about the separation of forms. In the *Phaedrus*, the forms are described as existing in a place beyond the universe; our souls can only see them at a distance, from the periphery of the universe, but can never exit the universe and enter the realm of forms (247b-c).<sup>48</sup> Just as the *Phaedrus* places the

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<sup>46</sup> In this chapter, I assume a developmentalist reading of Plato and attribute the shift between Plato's treatment of earned immortality in the *Phaedo* and *Symposium* to a growing skepticism about our prospects of fully assimilating to the forms. Those who subscribe to a unitarian reading might instead explain the divergence between the two dialogues in terms of their differing dramatic contexts. The *Phaedo* seeks to explain Socrates' confidence in the face of his imminent death and to provide a protreptic to philosophy; these features perhaps explain its confidence in the power of philosophy to confer an enhanced form of immortality onto the soul of the philosopher.

<sup>47</sup> For an excellent discussion of the progression of Plato's thought about immortality, see Bett 1999. Bett notes that the *Phaedo* treats the soul as immortal in virtue of being changeless, whereas later dialogues connect its immortality to its constant motion; however, Bett does not connect this progression to Plato's treatment of earned immortality.

<sup>48</sup> But see 248a for a possible softening of this degree of separation.

forms outside of space, so the *Timaeus* sets them outside of time. The forms possess ungenerated being; as such, they exist forever outside of time and are immune to change, ‘always immovably in the same state’ (38a). By contrast, as generated beings, the universe, including cosmic gods and mortal souls that reside within it, are incapable of eternal existence (37d). But at the same time as Plato specifies that our souls are incapable of assimilating to the changeless eternality of the forms, he offers us a downgraded version. The demiurge creates time as a ‘moving image of eternity’ (37d) – note the contrast with the immovable existence of forms – and confers immortality within time upon the rational parts of our souls.

Though this form of immortality inevitably involves motion, there is still a sense in which our souls can come to approximate – though not fully assimilate to – the changeless condition of the forms. We see this in how Plato characterizes divine soul. Though he presents the gods as in motion, he emphasizes that the form of motion that they partake of is maximally stable; furthermore, he identifies this form of stable motion with intelligence and wisdom. Thus, at 34a, Plato writes that the demiurge gave the universe the form of motion most associated with intelligence and wisdom, uniform rotation in the same place. Similarly, at 40a-b, the cosmic gods are given rotational and revolutionary motion; ‘with respect to the other five motions, [he made them] motionless and still, in order that each of them might be as good as possible’—the gods’ relative changelessness is identified with their goodness and perfection. The gods engage in rotational motion because this state of their souls is wisdom: they move uniformly in the same place so that ‘they always think the same things concerning the same things’ (40a-b). Plato further develops this idea in the *Laws*, when he argues that the universe is engaged in rotational motion because rotation is the form of motion most appropriate for reason, since it moves ‘regularly and uniformly in the same place and around the same things and in relation to the same things and

according to one principle and order' (898a-b). Though Plato does not fully spell out his reasoning, he appears to think that wisdom and intelligence have a stability that perhaps derives from the unchanging nature of their objects. Significantly, though, wisdom no longer involves the soul's fully assimilating to the unchanging eternality of its objects, but rather its engaging in a maximally stable form of motion. Thus, in the imagery of the *Phaedrus*, it is significant that when divine and mortal souls commune with the forms, they do so in a condition of both stability and motion: they station themselves on the periphery of the universe, and then, carried around by its rotational motion, gaze upon the forms (247b-c).<sup>49</sup>

But if divine soul is characterized, not by changelessness, but by stable motion, then to the extent that the philosopher seeks to assimilate to the divine, it is this condition that he seeks to approximate. And this is exactly how Plato characterizes earned immortality in the *Timaeus*. Though all souls partake of immortality to the extent that they possess reason, an immortal element, most souls are subject to chaotic motion, due to the impact of perceptible objects and the interference of the sub-rational parts of the soul (43a-e). But when the philosopher observes the perfect motions of world-soul, his soul assimilates to them and assumes a stable form of motion (47a-c). At the conclusion of the dialogue, in a passage I quoted earlier, Plato writes of how the man who devotes himself to philosophy, through thinking divine thoughts and grasping the truth, partakes of immortality to the extent possible (90a-d). His partaking of immortality is specifically characterized in terms of his studying the revolutions of the universe and as a result, adopting its motions. To the extent that human soul observes and thinks about the motions of the universe, it engages in those same motions; as a result, it comes to resemble divine soul. But to the extent that

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<sup>49</sup> The *Statesman* is also surely relevant to this discussion: in the myth, the universe adopts a renewed immortality when the god takes over its motion and sets it straight (273e).

divine soul engages in stable motion, it also approximates the changeless eternality of the forms.<sup>50</sup>

What Plato is offering here is no longer the hope that the philosopher's soul can fully assimilate to the changelessness of the forms; rather, he is outlining how as generated beings, our intellects can come to closely resemble divine soul and thereby approximate, to a lesser extent, the forms.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> For an extremely helpful discussion of this passage, see Sedley (1999: 319-22 and 2009: 158-60). Whereas Sedley focuses on the individual's identification with his immortal element, reason, as the means by which he gains immortality, my interpretation draws more attention to the way in which the philosopher's soul assimilates to the rational, stable motions of the world-soul.

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