

In Plato's *Phaedo*, Athenian Philosopher Socrates endeavors to persuade his interlocutors, Cebes and Sebias, of the immortality of the soul. One key line of Socratic reasoning, known as the argument from recollection, contends that the soul is prenatal through appeal to prenatal knowledge. In what follows I will lay out Socrates' argument from recollection and briefly argue that it does not remain sound in the face of logical scrutiny.

(P1) If we can recollect knowledge never learned during our lifetime, then the soul must have existed before birth.

(P2) We can recollect knowledge never learned during our lifetime.

(C) The soul must have existed before birth.

(P1) According to Socrates, knowledge can either be learned or recollected. While learning refers to the original acquisition of previously unheld knowledge, recollection refers to previously acquired knowledge that reemerges in your present awareness. Recollection may occur when one piece of knowledge brings to mind a separate piece of knowledge. For example, upon viewing a lyre, a subject may immediately associate the instrument with its owner. Knowledge of the lyre's owner could not be obtained solely through preceptory knowledge of the lyre, so it follows that the former must have been obtained previously and is now being recollected. Since knowledge has to be obtained (learned) at some point, Socrates contends that recollected knowledge not learned in this lifetime, if there is any, must have been acquired prenatally.

(P2) In order to motivate premise two Socrates contends we possess certain knowledge that cannot be acquired within the constraints of our imperfect world, and accordingly that it could not have been learned postnatally. According to Socrates, one item of such recollected knowledge is the idea of equality. For example, when we compare two items of present knowledge based on their physical similarity or dissimilarity, we necessarily recollect knowledge of perfect equality, or equality itself. That is, to say that two sticks "are relatively equal in length" implies that we possess some concept of perfect equality to serve as the baseline for this comparison. Having distinguished between our perceptions of equality and true equality, Socrates argues that the latter knowledge can never be found or acquired in the material world. Just as it is impossible to create our concept of a perfect circle in the material world without even the most infinitesimally small mathematical inaccuracy, we can never find true objects that are equal in all regards. After all, there is bound to be some minute difference, perhaps even at the atomic level. The impossibility of acquiring knowledge of true equality through the senses along with the fact that we appear to apply concepts of equality immediately upon the endowment of our senses (e.g. at birth) suggests strongly that this recollected knowledge is not learned postnatally.

Evaluation: A fundamental weakness within Socrates' argument for recollection lies within the first premise. More specifically, the existence of "unlearned" knowledge does not necessarily imply that this knowledge had to have been learned at some point in the past and Socrates does not adequately prove this. That is, one can just as easily contend that innate knowledge is a part of our nature in the sense that it is simply genetically inherited. Put differently, Socrates must prove that innate knowledge is not simply endowed at birth but had to have been learned from past experience: an argument that appears to be in contradiction with our modern understanding of biology.