Introduction

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When ancient philosophers describe the fate of the soul or the human being after death, in which cases should we attribute to them a theory of immortality? When their texts describe people – or their souls, parts, or possessions – as being or becoming 'immortal', what does the word mean? The research brought together here explores these questions. Whether or not we should stipulate the meaning of immortality depends on which question we are addressing. The first question is about our own use of the words 'immortal' and 'immortality' when reading and trying to understand ancient theories, and here it may be appropriate to set down that 'immortal' means, for example, everlasting. That is how Phillip Horky understands 'immortal' and 'immortality' in his chapter on whether Pythagorean theories of reincarnation (or, as it is also called, the transmigration of souls) require souls to be everlasting. By contrast, the second question is prompted by the wording of the texts we study, and it requires us to recognize and adapt to the meanings and criteria they set for immortality. Most of the chapters that follow are about the Greek philosophical tradition, and so it is usually the Greek word for 'immortal' (ἀθάνατος)[1] that will concern us.

The chapters that are primarily about the first question examine discussions of the afterlife among early philosophers, such as Pythagoreans and Empedocles. Those concerned with the second question, the meaning of 'immortal' and 'immortality', are mostly about Plato and Platonists, such as Philo and Plotinus, but they also include my own chapter on Aristotle, Stoics, and Epicureans. This second group of chapters do not all concern the afterlife: sometimes, such as in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, immortality is

[1] In the volume Greek words added parenthetically will be kept in Greek letters; otherwise single words and short phrases will be transliterated, except in cases (particularly footnotes) where the discussion is aimed at those studying works in the original Greek. In Catherine Rowett's chapter transliteration will be used more commonly, particularly for the various words meaning 'to live', 'life', 'to die', 'to have died', 'death', and so on, as distinctions between them are often crucial for her argument.

used to describe the best way to live, not a form of survival after death. When authors are looking forward to what awaits people at and after death, immortality can sometimes mean not being subject to, or destroyed by, death, without barring destruction in other circumstances. But sometimes it means everlastingness, or some other kind of resemblance to the divine.

Ancient debates about immortality, particularly in Greek philosophy, may appear to be ultimately debates about the soul: what is its nature and, if it is a temporal entity, its duration? In what follows we aim to show – without at all minimizing or denying the importance of theories about the soul[2] – how other areas of ancient inquiry and debate bear on the question of immortality, especially theology and the divine, the nature of life and death, and personal identity. For example, if immortality is conceived of as everlasting life, the particular conception of life in the author's cosmology or metaphysics becomes not merely relevant but criterial. If immortality means being immune to death, but perhaps not to all forms of destruction, then the nature of death will determine what is and is not immortal. In what follows I introduce these additional questions, using for the most part passages from Plato (especially the *Phaedo*) and the Platonic tradition, and indicate briefly, without an attempt at comprehensive summarizing, where in the collection they will be taken up further. But I begin with a distinction between kinds of immortality to which the contributors will often return. It concerns not the meaning of immortality – deathlessness, everlastingness, and so on – but whether or not immortality is an essential property of the immortal item.

1 Kinds of Immortality: Essential, Achieved, and Derived

Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* contains the famous story of Psyche and Cupid. When the two finally marry, Psyche, whose name means 'soul' in Greek, is made immortal. Jupiter gives her a cup of ambrosia with the words 'drink this, Psyche, and be immortal' (*immortalis esto*, *Metamorphoses* 6.23). Has Apuleius, a Platonist, forgotten his Plato?[3] In the formal arguments of the *Phaedo* and the palinode of the *Phaedrus* (245c–246a) Socrates' conclusion is that all souls are *essentially* immortal: each soul, no matter how wicked or

[2] See, for example, Phillip Horky's chapter and its discussion of the soul in Pythagoreanism and early atomism, or Simon Trépanier's chapter on the soul in other early philosophy.

[3] Hunter 2012: 232 contrasts this moment in the story with the essential immortality of souls in the *Phaedrus*. For the echo of Roman manumission ('be free') see Zimmerman et al. 2004: 545.

ignorant, is immortal, simply because it is a soul.[4] That is why, as Socrates says in the *Phaedo* when passing from argument to myth (107c–d), there is no escape from wickedness apart from becoming better: even the very worst souls will never be destroyed, despite their wickedness. So, we might think, for a follower of Plato there can be no process for a soul of becoming immortal or earning its immortality. Apuleius is of course aware of the Platonic doctrine of essential immortality. Elsewhere he says that all souls are immortal and does not so much as hint that they need to earn their immortality (*On the god of Socrates* 4.1, 15.3). But we need to go back to Plato's dialogues and appreciate the complexity of their accounts of immortality, which include passages where immortality is an achievement. One such passage is Diotima's account of love in the *Symposium*, according to which the philosopher, during life, either becomes immortal or attains a state close to immortality (212a). A second is Timaeus' description of a philosopher coming to 'share in immortality, so far as human nature can' (*Timaeus* 90c). Both passages are about human beings or soul–body composites, not souls, and the *Symposium* passage, where engaging in love makes one immortal, has a particularly obvious relevance to the story of Psyche and Cupid/Love. Perhaps then Apuleius has taken Platonic passages describing human beings attaining immortality and applied them to a story about a flesh-and-blood woman whose name nonetheless means 'soul'.

The relationship between essential immortality and achieved immortality will be a major theme of this book.[5] We should not assume that ancient philosophers viewed the two kinds of immortality as mutually exclusive. Perhaps one item achieves immortality (e.g. the soul–body composite) and another related item possesses it essentially (e.g. the soul, or a part of the soul). Or perhaps the immortality that is earned is something different from the immortality that is possessed essentially, as in Philo of Alexandria. According to Philo, the mind is essentially immortal or indestructible, but when joined with a body it is caught up in 'mortal life', and it can be said to have been 'immortalized' – that is, liberated from mortal life – if it achieves permanent release from reincarnation. Virtue in this sense 'immortalizes'

[4] Here I give my own view of the arguments, and for further discussion see the chapter by Trépanier and the last section of the chapter by Rowett. Rowett argues that immortality, at least in one sense, is achieved by the soul when it regains its own proper condition.

[5] The distinction between them was brought to prominence in Platonic studies by David Sedley, who also discusses a third kind: the immortality of created souls and deities in the *Timaeus*, where immortality is guaranteed by their divine creator. See Sedley 2009, an article to which this collection will often return.

the essentially immortal. Sami Yli-Karjanmaa argues that we cannot fully understand Philo's writing on immortality, and the combination of essential and achieved immortality, without recognizing his faithfulness to Plato on the subject of reincarnation.

Simon Trépanier explores the similar suggestion of release from reincarnation in the myth of Plato's *Phaedo*: we might be tempted to follow Philo and call this earned or achieved 'immortality', but according to Trépanier the *Phaedo*, like the *Republic* (611a), denies that the number of immortal items ever increases. Trépanier then applies the same distinction between kinds of immortality to earlier Greek discussions of the afterlife: in Heraclitus no soul is essentially immortal, and while a few are divinized, even in their case the new status is not permanent. For Empedocles divinity can be earned, but immortality, at least in the sense of everlastingness, cannot.

Suzanne Obdrzalek discusses the achievement of immortality in Plato's *Symposium*. She uses the *Phaedo* to explain why the *Symposium* appears to deny the immortality of the soul: in addition to the bare everlasting persistence possessed by all souls, there is an achieved or earned form of immortality, shown already in the Affinity Argument of the *Phaedo*, which is not only to persist but to persist without change. It is the second form of immortality, involving changelessness, that is denied to souls in the *Symposium*.

Sebastian Gertz brings out a similar but distinct contrast in Augustine's writing on immortality. According to Gertz, Augustine moves from a view of the soul as essentially immortal – that is, immortal because of the soul's own nature – to one where the soul derives or 'acquires' its immortality from something else, namely the truths of an a priori discipline. But Gertz presents the latter as a relation of ontological dependence, rather than as the soul's achievement of immortality at a particular time in its existence. Indeed, as Gertz observes, Augustine must avoid suggesting that immortality depends on special epistemic achievements, as his argument aims to show the immortality of *all* souls, including those of the foolish or uneducated.

2 Theology and Resemblance to the Divine

When Homer speaks of the 'immortals' (ἀθάνατοι) he often does not add the word for 'gods': the connection between the gods and immortality is so robust that nothing more than 'immortals' is needed to refer to them.[6] It is

[6] See e.g. *Iliad* 2.814, 9.110, 23.788; *Odyssey* 1.201, 3.242, 4.564, 15.173, 18.252.

not surprising, then, to find reflections on the divine guiding early attempts to show that the soul too is immortal. But successive innovations by philosophers in this area, theology and the divine, make the soul–divine comparison an area of unsettling and even polar change. Consider the contrast between the following two arguments, one attributed to Alcmaeon, the other known today as the Affinity Argument of Plato's *Phaedo* (discussed by Catherine Rowett in her chapter). Alcmaeon of Croton produced an argument for the immortality of soul – 'the very first argument in the field', as Barnes notes.[7] According to Aristotle, Alcmaeon's argument was that the soul resembles the heavens and the bodies in them, such as the sun and moon, by being in continuous motion. Alcmaeon either took for granted the immortality of these 'divine' celestial items or showed it independently. He then argued that, because of resemblance to them in respect of motion, the soul is itself immortal.[8]

> Alcmaeon says that the soul is immortal because it resembles the immortals; and it has this resemblance from its always being in motion. For divine things too – moon, sun, stars and the whole heaven – are continuously in motion. (Aristotle *De anima* A 2, 405a29–b1)

It is uncertain whether Alcmaeon's argument was in fact so simple. Scholars still disagree on whether it relied merely on similarity between the soul and celestial bodies in respect of motion, and the immortality of the latter, to show that they and the soul have immortality in common as well. According to another testimony (Aëtius 4.2.2), Alcmaeon also claimed that the soul moves itself – 'Alcmaeon says that the soul is a nature moved by itself in an everlasting motion, and for this reason is immortal and similar to the gods' – and this conception of the soul as a self-mover, reminiscent of Plato's *Phaedrus* (245c–246a), has been used to reconstruct on Alcmaeon's behalf more sophisticated arguments for its immortality.[9] But the immediate context in Aëtius throws into doubt the attribution to Alcmaeon of a conception of soul as self-mover: the very same view, that the soul moves itself, is attributed also to Thales and

[7] Barnes 1982: 120.

[8] Compare Diogenes Laertius 8.83: 'he [Alcmaeon] said also that the soul is immortal and moves continuously, as the sun does'. In addition to the passage of Aëtius quoted just below, see also Cicero *On the Nature of the Gods* 1.27; Eusebius *Preparation for the Gospel* 11.28.7–10; Clement of Alexandria *Protrepticus* 5.66.

[9] Barnes 1982: 116–20; Hankinson 1998: 30–3. Barnes relies also on the argument in *Phaedrus* 245c–246a, which he treats, as I suspect few others now would do, as a 'report' of Alcmaeon's argument (117). Even in Aëtius' testimony Alcmaeon's argument involves similarity to the divine, although now it appears in the conclusion rather than as a premise.

Pythagoras, as well as to Xenocrates and Plato. As Mansfeld has argued, it looks as if Plato and Xenocrates' conception of the soul has been projected back onto various earlier philosophers, including Alcmaeon.[10]

Contrast Alcmaeon's argument, at least as Aristotle presents it, with the Affinity Argument from Plato's *Phaedo*, where Socrates argues that the soul's similarity to immortal items shows its own immortality. In Plato the divine, 'immortal' items include Forms as well as gods, and the former are not only unmoving but completely changeless (78d). According to Plato's Socrates, when the soul is undisturbed by the body it considers the 'immortal', changeless Forms, and takes on their own changelessness: 'in relation to those entities the soul stays always in the same state and condition, because the things it is grasping have the same kind of stability' (79d). This is one of several respects in which the soul resembles the divine or immortal, and, Socrates argues, the set of resemblances between them shows that the soul is either indestructible or at least nearly so (80b). The parallel between Alcmaeon's argument and another Platonic argument for immortality mentioned above, that of the *Phaedrus*, is widely recognized. But in the *Phaedo* too Alcmaeon may have a presence, for elsewhere this dialogue seems to show familiarity with his doctrines.[11] Perhaps already in the *Phaedo* Plato has a debt to Alcmaeon's argument for the soul's immortality, but if so Alcmaeon's constantly moving divine items have been replaced by changeless Forms, and the soul's approximation to their changelessness, rather than its continuous motion, has become the point in favour of its immortality.

In my chapter I discuss not a formal argument for immortality but Stoic, Aristotelian, and Epicurean accounts of immortality in the light of the relevant theologies.[12] Stoic discussions of the soul's immortality have puzzled commentators, given that the cosmos in which the soul is located, even after death and separation from the body, will eventually be destroyed. But the Stoic doctrine becomes easier to understand when we compare the virtuous, discarnate soul to the lesser or intra-cosmic gods. Like the soul, those gods will be destroyed with the cosmos, and yet they

[10] 'The emphasis on the concept of self-motion throughout the first part of the chapter and its spread to the doxai [doctrines] of Thales and Pythagoras suggest that the presence of self-motion in the Alcmaeon doxa is also a matter of *interpretatio* and encroachment' (Mansfeld 2014).

[11] Socrates mentions later in the *Phaedo* a theory that the brain is responsible for sense-perception (96b). According to Theophrastus (DK A5), Alcmaeon noted that the senses are 'connected' to the brain, and (according to Aëtius, DK A8, A13) he located reason, or (in Stoic terms) the 'commanding faculty' of the soul, in the head. See Guthrie 1962–81, vol. 1: 349.

[12] The chapter uses my discussion of Aristotle, Epicureans, and Stoics published separately within Long 2019.

too are called 'immortal'. Their immortality consists in not being subject to *death* specifically, which is, according the Stoic Chrysippus, separation of soul from body. Virtuous souls too are not, once separated, subject to death, and yet they, like the intra-cosmic gods, will eventually be destroyed. The gods' immortality has been reimagined as a deathlessness that allows for other forms of destruction, and the soul's immortality is reinterpreted in precisely the same way.

Chrysippus' conception of death is thus critical for his writing on immortality. All the same, the meaning or meanings given to 'death' do not in all cases simply determine that of immortality. Philo of Alexandra sometimes uses 'death' to refer to a moral state, and yet, as Sami Yli-Karjanmaa notes, Philo never uses immortality to mean being immune to 'death' in this moral sense. This brings me to life and its continuation.

3 Life as Cognition and the Life of a Soul

What would it mean for life to be prolonged, or even infinitely prolonged? That depends on what we take to be required by life and most characteristic of it. We might include under that heading sense-perception, interaction with prey, threats and companions, and the production of offspring. To appreciate the strangeness, to our eyes, of some ancient views of life, imagine a creature with the following properties. It has no sense-organs, such as eyes and ears or their functional equivalents, and no organs of locomotion, such as feet. It has no limbs or appendages for interacting with its environment, such as arms, hands, or claws. It has no mates and never produces offspring, and has no predators, prey, or companions. It sustains itself, but without needing to take in food from an external environment. Its only actions are to make correct pronouncements on whatever it considers, to attain true opinion and understanding, and to express, through its movements, its own understanding. Its pronouncements are always silent and internal: it never has reason to express itself in sound, as it never encounters a friend, companion, threat, or potential mate. This may seem to us a creature that 'lives' in an extremely attenuated sense. But what I have described is the cosmos of Plato's *Timaeus*, and, according to that dialogue, of all the visible, changing organisms in existence it is this creature that resembles most closely the Form of Living Creature and best captures its properties in the visible, changing realm.[13] One crucial point

[13] Resembles the Form most (30c); solitude and self-sufficiency (33a, 34b); no organs of perception, grasping, self-defence, or locomotion (33c–34a); motion expressing intelligence (34a); self-sustaining by recycling waste (33c); internal pronouncements (37a–c). See Sattler (forthcoming).

I have omitted is that this creature, the cosmos, contains all other organisms. But its own existence is bound up exclusively with thought, intelligence, and the spatial movements that express them, and yet there is no hesitation at all in calling it 'living'. At an early stage of his description (30a–c) Timaeus says that the cosmos has been created so as to be intelligent, and that requires it to have a soul. Its having intelligence in a soul is enough for him to pronounce it a 'living creature'.[14] Before we are told anything in the *Timaeus* about human immortality or the afterlife, this is the account we are given of 'unceasing and intelligent life for all time' (36e).

Treating cognition and intelligence (and now, unlike in the *Phaedo*, with motion) as sufficient for life – and so, if they continue, for the continuation of life – is thus rooted in Plato's cosmology. It does not depend solely on reflections about human beings, our souls, and what becomes of us after death. Nor does this view of cognition-cum-locomotion as a form of life, and perhaps the supreme form of life, belong to Plato's cosmology alone. Empedocles' cosmology treats gods as created organisms, although they are particularly 'long-lived' organisms (B21.12, B23.8). What exactly does a god do during its long 'life'? Empedocles' answer seems to be that it moves, thinks, and understands: one god is described by him as being 'holy mind alone', 'racing across the entire cosmos with its swift thoughts' (B134).[15] Even a philosopher as steeped in what we call biology as Aristotle can express such a view of life, or rather in his case a view of life as cognition alone, without movement in space. This is part of his account of the divine unmoved mover:

> καὶ ζωὴ δέ γε ὑπάρχει· ἡ γὰρ νοῦ ἐνέργεια ζωή, ἐκεῖνος δὲ ἡ ἐνέργεια· ἐνέργεια δὲ ἡ καθ' αὑτὴν ἐκείνου ζωὴ ἀρίστη καὶ ἀΐδιος. φαμὲν δὴ τὸν θεὸν εἶναι ζῷον ἀΐδιον ἄριστον, ὥστε ζωὴ καὶ αἰὼν συνεχὴς καὶ ἀΐδιος ὑπάρχει τῷ θεῷ· τοῦτο γὰρ ὁ θεός.
>
> What is more, god has life. For actuality of intelligence is life, and that intelligence is such actuality. And the actuality, in itself, of that intelligence is the best and everlasting life. Now we say that god is an everlasting, and the best, living creature, and thus god has life – that is, continuous and everlasting eternity. For that is what god is. (Metaphysics Λ 7, 1072b26–30)[16]

[14] Compare the following exchange from Plato's *Sophist* (249a). Visitor from Elea: 'should we say that it has intelligence but does not have life?'; Theaetetus: 'how could we?' For an opposed view see Euripides *Helen* 1015: discarnate mind has intelligence but not life.

[15] For recent discussion see Picot and Berg 2018.

[16] At the end Aristotle exploits the dual meaning of αἰών as life and eternity. I interpret the καί . . . in ζωὴ καὶ αἰὼν . . . as spelling out the nature of god's ζωή, and ἐκεῖνος/ἐκείνου as a reference to (god's) intelligence, not god, but I have provided the Greek wording to show the possibility of different interpretations. Cf. Laks 2000: 236–7. For brief discussion of the *Metaphysics* passage in the broader context of Aristotle's work on plants and animals, see p. 181 of Gerson's chapter in this volume.

This is another conception of life independent of reflections on death and the afterlife and now related to theology. If Aristotle is correct, showing the continuation of intelligence after death is not to show the persistence merely of a feeble afterimage of life. If intelligence is actualized, there is life.

Of all ancient Greek reflections on human mortality Plato's *Phaedo* is probably the most familiar to students today. In that dialogue Socrates takes the soul as the seat of reason and intelligence and tries to show that its existence and indeed its life are not bounded by its partnership with a body. Catherine Rowett distinguishes between different kinds of 'life' and 'death' in that dialogue. She argues that the soul's immortality is not everlasting existence so much as the timelessness it shares with the Forms.[17] This is not a view of the soul put forward by the character Socrates, who is no less concerned than his friends to establish whether the soul has survival in time; it emerges, she argues, as a Platonic subtext.

Sebastian Gertz's chapter, mentioned already above, explores texts much less familiar to most students of ancient philosophy: Augustine's *Soliloquies* and *Immortality of the Soul.* Augustine argued from the soul's possession of intelligence and understanding to the continuation of life after death. A discipline can exist only in something 'living', and so something that possesses an everlasting discipline must itself 'live for ever' (*Immortality of the Soul* 1.1).[18] But, as Gertz shows, the argument for life after death shows merely that the soul's understanding of intelligible reality continues after death – not that it continues to possess the full range of traits that might seem essential to its identity.

4 Identity

As Socrates' death approaches in the *Phaedo*, he is asked by Crito, 'how should we bury you?' (115c). Socrates eventually gives Crito an answer to the practical question – whatever Crito wants and deems most conventional – but he does not miss the chance to point out what he sees as Crito's error. He laughs, warns Crito that he may escape and so foil their attempts to bury him, and then explains the warning to his friends: he, Socrates, is not what will become a corpse, but what has been responsible for a large share of their conversation (115c). What that very item – the conversation-contributor, not the physical body – has long been arguing is precisely that he, or it, will

[17] By contrast, Gerson later interprets the immortality of the soul, in both Plato and Plotinus, as the immortality of a temporal or 'temporalized' entity.

[18] Compare *Immortality of the Soul* 23: the changes the soul undergoes (for example in sleep) do not diminish the soul's 'own life'.

escape at death. Socrates does not actually say in his answer that he is to be identified with his 'soul', although there is undoubtedly a reference back to the arguments for the soul's immortality. Instead he identifies himself as 'the one who is now holding a conversation – setting out remarks one by one' (115c). Crito has put a question to that entity about its/his burial, and Socrates is taking him at his word: it, the addressee of Crito's question and the one now giving a reply to him, will never become a corpse.

Two chapters take up the question of immortality and personal identity, and both find challenges to common-sense views of our identity. James Warren's chapter is about the dialogue *Axiochus*. He addresses the puzzling combination of a symmetry argument – after death, as before his birth, Axiochus will not exist or have perception – with an assertion by Socrates of the soul's immortality and our identity as souls. How can Socrates both identify Axiochus with his immortal soul and claim that Axiochus will no longer exist after death? Part of Warren's answer is to suggest that Socrates is moving Axiochus from a common-sense conception of his identity, as a human living being with a particular date of birth, to another, as a soul, which is itself a kind of 'living being' (*Axiochus* 365e).

Lloyd Gerson discusses Plotinus' writing on the soul's incorporeality and immortality and Ideas or Forms of individuals. In Plotinus too there is an attempt to shift conceptions of our identity, from the self-conception of a soul–body composite to identification with an intellect that is not, in itself, distinctive or unique. For Plotinus the answer to Crito, back in the *Phaedo*, gives an important part of the story, but not the whole of it, about Socrates' true identity. It was Socrates' soul or intellect, not his body, that led and in other ways contributed to their conversation, and he should certainly identify himself with that intellect more than with his body. And yet it is not even with a distinctive intellect that Socrates should ultimately identify himself.

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