

Unknowing and Unnerved: an Interpretation of Socrates from the Perspective of
Existential Psychology

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Introduction

The Socratic paradox, that is, that we aren't or rather *can't* be certain of what we know, is a recurrent theme throughout Plato's anthology. This can be quite an ineffable notion to undertake insofar as the implications are dire. If certainty is beyond our epistemological reach, the mind struggles to confront life's especially critical questions. While it has long been the tradition of philosophy to resolve this problem, existential psychologist Irvin Yalom has more recently brought it to the attention of the scientific community. He theorizes that upon one's realization that questions pertaining to death, meaning of life, subjective isolation, and freedom (which he calls the "four concerns") are impossible to answer with absolute certainty, a sinister kind of anxiety sets in, deeply enervating one's keenness for life. Yalom calls this "existential anxiety", and believes it to be a natural and inevitable burden of the human condition.

To ameliorate this anxiety, Yalom believes that many people resort to fixing beliefs, which range from pathological to salutary. Yalom believes that, in many cases, by taking solace in an ultimate savior, metaphysical constitution, or *both*, one displaces one's anxieties and in effect assures oneself that one will never die, one's life has meaning, one's subjective experience is connected to others, and that one's sense freedom is limited by a prescribed set of normative principles. In this context, it's no wonder why so many religious modalities and philosophic systems are designed to address these four issues directly.

If Yalom's theory of existential anxiety is correct, Plato's Socratic paradox mentioned herein is neither profound nor unique. If anything, it serves as historical evidence that the problem of uncertainty has indeed spanned the ages. If we are to suppose that the problem of uncertainty is what engenders Yalom's four concerns, then it's my view that much of Plato's philosophy can be interpreted as the written instantiation of said anxiety's

resolve. The main purpose of this essay is to substantiate this view; which I will do by comparing certain assertions put forth by Plato to the coping mechanisms outlined by Yalom. A secondary purpose is to contend that Plato handles Yalom's existential concerns beneficently.

This essay has four main sections. Each of these four sections will be dedicated to one of Yalom's four existential concerns, and will adhere to a certain arrangement: First, I will summarize the concern as Yalom conceives it. Second, I will demonstrate the plausibility of the concern by citing relevant psychological studies. Third, I will demonstrate how arguments put forth by Plato exhibit certain qualities that indicate he is indeed burdened by the concern. In a conference setting, where brevity is key, I'll be forced to gloss over some of these points. However, because this is a relatively novel interpretation of Plato, I hope you'll agree that a survey, rather than a point by point examination, will be sufficient.

Concern #1: Death

Yalom believes that *fear of death* is the most prevalent and influential of the four existential concerns. He maintains that this fear dwells in every level of human awareness at all times, "from the most conscious and intellectualized, to the deepest depths of the unconscious"¹, albeit at varying levels of intensity. It's by virtue of this potency and pervasiveness that Yalom believes the fear of death accounts for a vast and multifarious set of coping strategies:

"...modes that consist of denial-based strategies such as suppression, repression, displacement, belief in personal omnipotence, acceptance of socially sanctioned religious beliefs that "detoxify" death, or personal efforts to overcome

¹ Smith, Stephen B., *Death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness, and the existential psychotherapy of Irvin D. Yalom*, AUT Research Gateway, 2012, 8.

death through a wide variety of strategies that aim at achieving symbolic
immortality.”²

The fear of death and its subjective and behavioral effects have been studied extensively in modern psychology, such that there is a seemingly limitless trove of data to which we could refer in our present discussion. Studies that are of particular interest involve those conducted by terror management theorists, in which subjects are first exposed to a mortality salience primer, and then to another measurable variable. A meta-analysis of 227 of these studies conducted by Burke, Martens, and Faucher makes the general conclusion that persons who are made aware of their own mortality are more likely to seek out validation of their personal worldviews³. These findings indicate that personal worldview (or philosophy, we might say) could function as an inoculator from death anxiety.

This notion bears a similarity to Plato’s claim that a function of philosophy is to prepare one for death.⁴ This is especially apparent in *Phaedo*, where he lays out his theory of the immortal soul. His argument is predicated on a set of assumptions. The first of these assumptions is the existence of a realm of forms.⁵ Plato affirms that the forms of beauty, justice, and so on are those to which a philosopher ought to strive. These are intellectual prizes, whose understanding can only be had through careful philosophic introspection⁶. The second assumption is that death is, in actuality, the separation of soul and body.⁷ The body and all of its earthly desires impede the soul from achieving knowledge of the forms. Thus, Plato concludes that it is unreasonable for a philosopher to fear dying because his death will only liberate his soul from his body’s encumbering desires.⁸

² Yalom, Irvin D., and Modyn Leszcz, *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy*, 15th edition, 2005, 111.

³ Burke, B. L., Martens, E., and Faucher, A., *Two Decades of Terror Management Theory: A Meta-Analysis of Mortality Salience Research*, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2010 155-195.

⁴ Plato, Jowett, Benjamin, *Phaedo*, MIT Internet Archives, 2001, 64a.

⁵ This is more of a given than an assumption, however, the events in *Phaedo* occur after the events of the *Parmenides*, and so Platos’ holding that the theory of forms as absolutely true at this point is in some sense presumptuous.

⁶ *Phaedo*, 65d.

⁷ This is presented as a given through and through, to which not a single objection is made or accounted for in the *Phaedo*.

⁸ *Phaedo*, 65a-d.

Yalom predicts this sort of defense, “Most individuals will defend against death anxiety through a belief in their own inviolability”.^{9,10} This inviolability can take on many forms (e.g. one’s legacy, the posterity of one’s children, or an infinite afterlife). In Plato’s case, he interprets death as an ennobling ether of the immortal soul, allowing him to rest assured that his impending doom is, in reality, a kind of liberation. We don’t often see Plato making such a forthright assertion, and so his interpretation of death is *in at least this way* different from his other, more qualified arguments. What accounts for this difference? In the present context, it would appear that Plato, like any other human being, is wrestling with an incurable existential quandary. Simmias would agree, “I think, Socrates, as perhaps you do yourself, that it is either impossible or very difficult to acquire clear knowledge about these matters in this life.”¹¹

Concern #2: Meaninglessness

Yalom likens *meaninglessness* to a forlorn state of hopelessness. Viewing the universe and life itself as serving no determinate purpose, one who struggles with meaninglessness fails to find value in one’s efforts, bringing about an overwhelming sense of apathy. Yalom writes:

“The human being seems to require meaning. To live without meaning, goals, values, or ideals, seems to provoke considerable distress. In severe form it may lead to the decision to end one’s life”¹².

A subjective sense of meaning, or lack thereof, has proven to have profound effects in almost every category of the self through a variety of empirical studies. Zika and Chamberlain¹³ discovered that a subjective sense of purpose (i.e., meaning) is positively correlated with various aspects of physiological wellbeing, including

⁹ Yalom, Irvin D., *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy*, 141

¹⁰ Yalom is careful to point out that his use of the term ‘delusional’ shouldn’t be taken derogatively. His meaning is more of a ‘fixed false belief’, one he thinks is necessary coping mechanism present in all humans.

¹¹ *Phaedo*, 85c

¹² Yalom, *The theory of group psychotherapy*, 422.

¹³ Zika, Sheryl, and Chamberlain, Kerry, *On the relation between meaning in life and psychological well-being*, Psychological Society, 1992, 133-144.

immune system efficiency, and negatively correlated with various psychological pathologies, including –as Yalom predicted- suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, Reker found that a sense of purpose in life negatively correlates with physiological ailments (i.e., chronic pain, illness),¹⁴ and late-life depression.^{15,16} These findings are consistent with Yalom’s claim that a perception of meaning in life ultimately has great bearing on our general wellbeing.

The purpose of life, according to Plato, is to live virtuously. On many occasions, Plato defends virtue as a good in and of itself, and contends that everyone, especially philosophers, ought to strive toward this end insofar as it’s their inherent purpose to do so. The reasoning Plato employs to make such a claim is an appeal to the forms. He believed that by studying a thing’s form, that is, its essential quality, one could ultimately determine the thing’s purpose. For Plato, the essential quality of human nature is rationality, and so he believed our purpose is to actualize it. In the process of actualizing our rationality, we come to prudent conclusions, and as a result lead a virtuous life.¹⁷ The carrying out of this process is equivalent to the attainment of happiness, which Plato regards as the most fundamental and universal human desire.

Plato clearly believes in a relationship between meaning in life and happiness, that is, he believes that one who fulfills one’s purpose is happy, one who fails to do so is not. This relationship is proven to be of great interest to Plato, as time and time again it comes up throughout his anthology. A most poignant example is found in *Crito*, wherein Socrates rejects the possibility of saving his own life in favor of upholding virtue. Socrates poses the question to his would-be rescuer, “Would life be worth having, if that higher part of man be deprived, which is improved by justice and deteriorated by injustice?”¹⁸

¹⁴ Reker, Gary T., Peacock, Edward J., and Wong, Paul T. P., *Meaning and purpose in life and well-being: a life-span perspective*, Journal of Gerontology, 1987, 44-49.

¹⁵ Reker, Gary T., *Personal meaning, optimism, and choice: existential predictors of depression in community and institutional elderly*, The Gerontologist, 1997, 709-716.

¹⁶ Relative to early-onset depression, late-life depression is less influenced by genetics and more influenced by environmental factors, including those pertaining to the existential concerns cited in the present discussion.

¹⁷ Stevenson, Leslie, *Seven Theories of Human Nature*, Oxford University Press, 1987, 31-32.

¹⁸ Plato, and Applebaum, Stanley, *Phaedo*, Dover Publishing, 1992, 48.

Why so intransigent? Generally, we know Socrates as the embodiment of philosophic questioning. Why in this case does Plato repeatedly have him stand by this assertion so staunchly? With respect to Yalom's theory, it's possible that this assertion functions as a resolution of the anxiety associated with meaninglessness. As we see from the example from *Crito*, Socrates' purpose in life is tantamount to his justification for living. Under such pretenses, one would certainly be disposed to maintain belief in such a purpose. In any case, the concept of self-actualization is not unique to Plato. On the contrary, Yalom argues it is the single most adhered to defense for meaninglessness anxiety.¹⁹

Concern # 3: Isolation

Isolation anxiety is a product of our social inclinations, and is given rise to by the realization of the impossibility of intersubjectivity, which generally persists as an unconscious dread, becoming conscious only under certain circumstances.

Currently, there is a dearth of empirical literature studying the phenomenon of isolation anxiety. Yalom predicted this, in a sense, when he claimed that psychologists have difficulty observing existential isolation apart from loneliness or self-suppression. However, there are countless studies that link social integration to various aspects of psychological and physiological wellbeing. Thus, it is likely that a study that manipulated existential isolation salience would yield comparable results.

The issue of existential isolation seems to escape the consideration of Plato as well. It never comes up in the sense in which Yalom uses it. However, a set of positions held by Plato, when related, could suggest that he may indeed have conceived of it. First, arguments put forth by Plato in book one of the *Republic* attribute a social nature to mankind.²⁰ While Plato never makes this claim as explicitly as Aristotle does in book one of the *Politics*,

¹⁹ Yalom, *The Theory of Group Psychotherapy*, 438

²⁰ Stevenson, Leslie, *Seven Theories of Human Nature*, 33

it is generally agreed upon that he and Aristotle hold similar views that humans are naturally interdependent creatures, and thus thrive best in a society.²¹ Second, in part one of the *Theaetetus*, Plato makes a distinction between things that are and things that are *as they occur to man*. While there is some disagreement of the interpretation of this distinction,²² it is generally taken that Plato is not comfortable with reducing knowledge to subjective experience.²³

If we relate these two positions, the outcome is an implied acknowledgement of existential isolation, insofar as Plato A) believes humans to thrive best when they are connected and interdependent with one another, and B) maintains that subjective experience is private to the individual. From this position, we might recognize a latent motive to Plato's refutation of Protagorean subjectivism.²⁴ If true knowledge is obtainable, which Plato contends is the case, then our private perceptions can at least be derived from a common, objective reality. While I don't contend that it was his primary intention, it is my view that Plato's refutation of Protagorean subjectivism could have at least in part been motivated by an unconscious dread of existential isolation. Yalom would call this defense mechanism "fusion-isolation",²⁵ wherein one relies upon the agreement of one's perspective with another's, in order to validate oneself, or at least come to some ease in light of his or her isolation.

Concern #4: Freedom

Yalom believes the intersection of perceived meaninglessness and fear of death is what gives rise to existential freedom anxiety, insofar as our perceived meaninglessness opens an infinite array of normatively

²¹ Cooper, John M., Plato's Theory of Human Motivation, *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 1984, 3.

²² See Chappell, Sophie Grace, "Plato on Knowledge in the *Theaetetus*", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), for a detailed discussion of the varying interpretations.

²³ Plato, and Benardete, Seth, *The Being of the Beautiful: Plato's Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman*, University of Chicago Press, *Theaetetus*, 160b-161e.

²⁴ Yalom predicts that the anxiety of existential isolation, as well as the defenses against it, are in most cases unconscious (Yalom, p. 362).

²⁵ Yalom, *The Theory of Group Psychotherapy*, 377

equivalent options, while our impending death impresses a sense of urgency to make something of these options.²⁶

This interplay of existential concerns is what gives rise to what many psychologists refer to today as simply “freedom anxiety”.

Freedom anxiety has only recently become the subject of empirical inquiry. In the past, freedom salience has shown to correlate positively with self-esteem²⁷. These findings, I think, are in line with our intuitions about freedom. However, when *existential* freedom is primed, that is, when study participants are made conscious of their Sartrean freedom, a kind of anxiety is readily observed. For example, in the spring of 2014, I helped social psychologist Dr. Kenneth Vail of Cleveland State University run a series of pilot studies whose results indicated that participants who were subtly made aware of their existential freedom were more likely to prefer authoritarian leadership styles. We conclude our findings suggest that existential freedom salience could cause a degree of anxiety, and that people tend to resolve this anxiety by surrendering their freedom to an authoritarian leader.

The concern of existential freedom is contingent upon the existence of human agency. That is, one without the faculty to choose, or at least without *the perception* of the faculty to choose, is one who has no need to fret about exercising their freedom.²⁸ Thus, it would be unreasonable to attribute existential freedom anxiety to Plato if he were aptly indexed as a determinist. While there is some discussion about this categorization,²⁹ it is generally taken that Plato indeed believed in human agency, and so the present discussion will take this view.

There is yet another distinction that needs to be made, though. While Plato may aptly be described as affirming human agency, it is not necessarily the case that he believes in absolutely undetermined agency. Instead, Plato argues that there are certain motivating aspects of human nature that inevitably influence the choices we make. Referring to his tripartite theory of the soul can help determine what Plato means by this. Each part of the

²⁶ Smith, S. B., *Death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness*, 2012, 61.

²⁷ Rakos, Richard F. et al. *Belief in Free Will: Measurement and Conceptualization Innovations*, Behavior and Social Issues, 2008, 20-39.

²⁸ Hence the reason participants in the Vail surrendered their right to choose. Without choice, there is no existential freedom anxiety.

²⁹ See Penner, T., *Socratic ethics: ultra-realism, determinism, and ethical truth*, 2005, for a deterministic interpretation of Plato.

soul has unique, inherent interests. Sometimes, these interests are at odds with one another. Many interpretations of this theory believe that our agency is what brings resolve to these competing interests, and what ultimately determines our behavior.^{30,31}

With respect to the anxiety of existential freedom, Yalom predicts a number of defenses in which one might engage, including displacement of responsibility and compulsivity.³² Yalom might find Plato's tripartite theory of the soul as subsuming both to some degree, insofar as Plato accounts for the compulsivity of human appetite, and maintains normative behavioral prescriptions he derives from human nature. In other words, Plato refers to an account of predetermined human nature to both *explain* and *direct* human agency. Thus, Plato's soft-deterministic view could be interpreted as a remediation of existential freedom anxiety.

Conclusion

Plato doesn't often make assertions. In fact, many of Plato's dialogues end in *aporia*. It's interesting then that a number of the assertions he's willing to stand by are applicable to the four existential concerns outlined by Yalom. To determine with any certainty whether the motivation behind these assertions was merely Plato's personal remediation of existential anxiety is not only impossible, but also irrelevant. What *is* relevant is that his philosophy does indeed address these concerns, which indicates that they were at least of interest to him.

It would seem reasonable, then, to interpret Plato's philosophy as a great cathartic meditation; an elaborate application of reason unto these existential concerns, *even if* it's not what Plato had intended. However, to dismiss his philosophy as a mere 'defense mechanism' is not the purpose of this paper, for that would be a great injustice. The interpretation taken herein shouldn't be diminishing in any way. Yalom believes that all human beings deal with these

³⁰ See Watson, Gary, *Free Will*, Oxford Readings in Philosophy, 2003, for such an interpretation.

³¹ See Wolf, Susan, *Freedom Within Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press., 1990, for such an interpretation with an emphasis on ethics.

³² Smith, S. B., *Death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness*, 2012, 22.

concerns in one way or another. Plato is no exception. Where Plato proves exceptional is in his handling of these concerns. While many people (including some philosophers) confront existential anxiety by resorting to maladaptive and often intolerant worldviews, Plato rejects dogma and makes an appeal to reason. His exhaustive, open-minded approach never fails to derive conclusions which are generally beneficent, even if not universally agreeable. A world view which is both innocuous to the well-being of the one holding it, as well as generally beneficent to the society in which the holder lives, are taken, by psychology, to be salutary. Plato's philosophy serves as a perfect exemplar under these conditions, especially when compared to other options, such as intolerant or dogmatic belief systems.

As mentioned in the introduction, philosophy and religion are often weighed on the same scale because they both attend to certain curiosities that exceed the epistemic reach of human observation, and thusly, attend to our innate existential concerns. While studies have shown religious belief to mitigate levels of existential anxiety,³³ these benefits have, in many cases, come at the cost of dogma and intolerance.³⁴ Additionally, over sixteen percent of the world population does not subscribe to a religion whatsoever.³⁵ This number jumps to twenty-three percent in the United States,³⁶ and is expected to grow exponentially. These circumstances make apparent the exigency of a *reasonable resolve* for existential anxiety.

The purposes of philosophy unto the individual are sometimes unclear. It's my view that the interpretation herein could provide some direction. If it is indeed the case that the deepest, most unconscious and pervasive motivations for human behavior beyond those associated with basic survival are the anxieties associated with Yalom's existential concerns, then perhaps the purpose of philosophy unto the individual is to offer humanity a healthy method of resolving this anxiety- a method that heals the world of intolerance and social dissonance and instead appeals to *reason*. As Plato

³³ See APA interview with Dr. Ken Pargament, *What Role do Religion and Spirituality Play in Mental Health*, 2013, for a brief but informative overview of current empirical findings demonstrating the psychological benefits of religious practice/belief.

³⁴ See Harris, Sam, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and The future of Reason*, WW Norton Company NY, 2004 for a comprehensive examination of the social problems associated with religious belief.

³⁵ Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life – *Global Religious Landscape*, December 2012

³⁶ Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life – *Global Religious Landscape*, December 2012

so eloquently put it, “The soul is cured of its maladies by certain incantations; these incantations are *beautiful reasons*.”³⁷

³⁷ Plato, and Emerson, R.W., *Essays and Lectures, Charmides*, Library Classics of America, 1983, 462