

# Episode 276 - TD06 - Is Memory Evidence For The Divinity Of The Soul?

Post by "Joshua" of April 13, 2025 at 12:47 PM

While recording this episode we discussed Plato's view on learning and recollection, as described by Cicero here in section XXIV;

## Quote

Besides, if desires and aversions were all that belonged to the soul, it would have them only in common with the beasts; but it has, in the first place, memory, and that, too, so infinite, as to recollect an absolute countless number of circumstances, which Plato will have to be a recollection of a former life; for in that book which is inscribed Menon, Socrates asks a child some questions in geometry, with reference to measuring a square; his answers are such as a child would make, and yet the questions are so easy, that while answering them, one by one, he comes to the same point as if he had learned geometry.

I made a connection between this passage and books about "Near-death experiences" - books like [Heaven is for Real](#), which tells the story of a young boy's appendectomy and his alleged experience of journeying to heaven after losing consciousness.

In the book, the father (Todd) of the boy (Colton) claims to be 'initially skeptical' about the experience, and he questions his son on what he saw. He claims that he refrained from asking leading questions.

Now, while kids are not omniscient, they are smarter than we give them credit for. In the late 19th and early 20th century there was a horse in Germany named [Clever Hans](#), and during public demonstrations this horse would give the appearance of performing arithmetic - literally counting with a hoofbeat. Wikipedia gives this summary;

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Hans was a horse owned by Wilhelm von Osten, who was a gymnasium mathematics teacher, an amateur horse trainer and phrenologist and was considered to be a mystic.[1] Hans was said to have been taught to add, subtract, multiply, divide, work with fractions, tell the time, keep track of the calendar, differentiate between musical tones, and read, spell, and understand German. Von Osten would ask Hans, "If the eighth day of the month comes on a Tuesday, what is the date of the following Friday?" Hans would answer by tapping his hoof eleven times. Questions could be asked both

orally and in written form. Von Osten exhibited Hans throughout Germany and never charged admission. Hans' abilities were reported in The New York Times in 1904.

The problem of how this horse could give the appearance of doing these things was answered in 1907, when

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psychologist Oskar Pfungst demonstrated that the horse was not actually performing these mental tasks, but was watching the reactions of his trainer. The horse was responding directly to involuntary cues in the body language of the human trainer, who was entirely unaware that he was providing such cues.

On the one hand, we are asked to believe uncritically that a horse can understand fractions, and that a little boy went to heaven and came back, and that a child can explain geometry without having learned it - and from all this we should infer, for example, the eternity of the soul, the reality of Paradise after death, and the innate knowledge of everything at birth.

On the other hand, we can choose to approach these claims critically. Perhaps Todd Burpo, a Christian pastor himself, had filled his son's head with claims about heaven, and then heard those claims restated under questioning. Perhaps horses as well as humans are shrewd observers, and derived information from these observations that other baffled humans did not even know that they were themselves providing.

Perhaps the mind is a better and more sagacious judge when calm and sober, and that when undergoing traumatic experiences the mind is less reliable and not more so.

And perhaps that is why Lucian of Samosata in his [Alexander the Oracle-Monger](#) suggests that these apparent prodigies provide

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an occasion for a Democritus, nay, for an Epicurus or a Metrodorus, perhaps, a man whose intelligence was steeled against such assaults by scepticism and insight, one who, if he could not detect the precise imposture, would at any rate have been perfectly certain that, though this escaped him, the whole thing was a lie and an impossibility.