CHAPTER FOUR
MEMORY, FORGETFULNESS AND RECOLLECTION
IN THE COMMENTARIES ON PLATO’S PHAEDO

1. Introduction

Socrates’ argument from opposites at Phd. 69e–72d had set out to prove the existence of the soul after death; but, as Socrates himself recognizes, a full proof of immortality requires that we demonstrate both the soul’s existence before its embodiment and its existence after physical death. The argument from recollection that occupies pages 72e3–78b3 of the Phaedo is first introduced by Cebes as an independent argument showing that ‘soul seems to be something immortal in this way too’ (καὶ ταύτη ἀθάνατον ἢ ψυχή τι έσχεν εἶναι; 73a2–3). At the conclusion of the argument, at 77b1, however, Simmias raises the concern that, irrespective of its pre-existence, soul may still come to an end after death. Cebes promptly agrees with Simmias that only one half of the immortality thesis has so far been covered (77c4–8). But Socrates suggests that the argument should be combined (cf. 77c10: συνθέειν) with the argument from opposites and reminds both his interlocutors that the existence of soul after death has already been proved (77c9 ff.):

εἰ γάρ ἔστιν μὲν ἢ ψυχή καὶ πρότερον, ἀνάρχη δὲ αὐτή εἰς τὸ ζήν ιούση τε καὶ γνομένη μπαμόδεν ἄλλην ἢ ἐκ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ τεθνάναι γίγνεσθαι, πῶς οὖν ἀνάρχη αὐτήν καὶ ἐπειδὰν ἀποθάνη ἐναι, ἐπειδή γε δεί αὐθῆς αὐτήν γίγνεσθαι;

For if the soul exists also before, and it must both come into life and be born from nowhere else but from death and from being dead, how can it not be necessary that it exists after it has died as well, given, at any rate, that it must be born again?

If the soul has existed before entering the body, and enters into living from a state of separation from the body (‘death and being dead’; d2), it must also survive when it has become separated again (‘when it has died’; d3–4) in order to be reborn. At first sight, nothing that Socrates says at this point seems to go beyond the purported conclusion of the cyclical argument. Although the claim ‘soul existed before [entering the body]’
could be supported by the recollection argument, it would follow equally well from the cyclical argument.\footnote{See also Gallop (1975), 135–137, who raises the difficulty that if the argument from opposites were to prove both halves of the immortality thesis, both post- and pre-existence, the recollection argument would have no obvious philosophical work left to do, \textit{pace} Socrates’ claim at 77c9ff. Since Olympiodorus and Damascius do not consider the argument from opposites to prove any more than limited post-existence, they can fully account for the division of labour between the two arguments as Socrates proposes it.} When Socrates summarizes the cyclical argument, he includes the premise that ‘all that is living comes from what is dead’ (77c8–9), which must entail the pre-existence of some souls to animate the ‘dead’, i.e. people not yet in existence. There is a difficulty, then, in deciding to what extent the recollection argument has brought the discussion forward, and Socrates’ combined proof seems to make little use of its more interesting conclusions (in particular, the claim that soul when separated from the body has ‘some power and wisdom’, as stated by Cebes at 70b3–4).

The central insights underlying the argument from recollection have been worked out in the famous slave-boy example in the \textit{Meno} (81e3–86e6), which is presented as a solution to the problem how learning is possible (‘we can inquire neither into what we do not know nor into what we know already’). The slave-boy, under Socrates’ dialectical guidance, arrives at a geometrical insight that he did not consciously know before, thus providing an example of how, through skilful questioning, knowledge which one was not previously aware of possessing may be brought to light. In the \textit{Phaedo}’s argument from recollection, Socrates builds on this epistemological point, that knowledge may come about by ‘being reminded’, while at the same time clarifying the ontological status of the kind of knowledge that the soul is being reminded of (74a9–77a5).

The central features of the kind of recollection under discussion in the \textit{Phaedo} are set out carefully by Socrates himself:

(i) Recollection implies having previous knowledge of the thing recollected (73c1–2).
(ii) Recollection may be triggered by sense-perception (73c6–7).
(iii) When (ii) occurs, recollection involves a different knowledge from the things that trigger recollection (73c7–d1).
(iv) Recollection can be caused by similar or dissimilar things (74a2–3).
(v) Where recollection is caused by similar things, a judgment as to whether the item perceived falls short of what it resembles is inevitably made by the one who recollects (74a5–7).