CHAPTER FIVE

THE AFFINITY ARGUMENT IN PLATO’S PHAEDO

1. Introduction

The argument from the soul’s affinity to the intelligible realm is, with a few notable exceptions, generally considered to be the weakest argument in Plato’s Phaedo.¹ It takes its starting-point from Cebes’ suggestion at Phd. 70a1 ff., that there is a common fear the soul might disperse at the point of death, when it is separated from the body. Cebes’ fear is taken up again by Socrates at 77c6–7 after the recollection argument, with the approval of Simmias who considers as unresolved the question whether the soul will survive death, even if it may pre-exist the body (as the recollection argument would suggest). Socrates’ first response is to invite his interlocutors to combine the argument from recollection with the cyclical argument (77c7–d5), which had established that ‘everything that is alive has come to be from what is dead’ (c8–9).

When the dialectical enquiry takes a new start, Socrates considers the question to what kind of thing it does or does not belong (πρ/ομίσθει; 78b4.c2–3; 80b7) to be dispersed, and to what kind the soul belongs. The argument, in the order it is presented by Socrates, runs as follows:

¹ Elton (1997) sees an ‘object lesson in how not to do good philosophy’ (313) in the affinity argument, and connects its supposed failure to Simmias’ and Cebes’ objections at 84c1–88b8. The analogical method of argument leads to the misology passage at 88c1–91c5, which raises the danger of general mistrust in philosophical arguments (315–316). A more sympathetic approach is taken by Dorter (1976), who considers the affinity argument to be on a par with the argument from design in terms of its intuitive appeal, while expressing reservations about its logical force (298: ‘the argument is clearly not intended to be a rigorous one’). Rowe (1991) urges readers of the Phaedo to integrate the dialectical part of the argument into the larger context of the discussion. The exhortation to purity at Phd. 80c2–84b8 forms part of the whole argument, which is in effect a piece of rhetoric under the guise of dialectics (476). In the most thorough recent analysis, Apolloni (1996) seeks to revalidate the argument as a deductive proof, and assigns ‘greater philosophical merit’ to it than to the recollection argument or the final argument (7).
(1) Composite things are liable to be dissolved; in composite things alone are indissoluble, if anything can be (78c1–4).
(2) Composite things are ‘different at different times and never constant’; in composite things are ‘always constant and unchanging’ (c6–8).
(3) The objects of dialectic (Forms) are unchanging; particulars (objects of perception) are never identical with themselves or identically related to one another (c10–e4).
(4) Forms are invisible; particulars are visible (79a1–8).
(5) The invisible is always constant; the visible never (a9–10).
(6) We are composed of body and soul (b1–2).
(7) The body is more similar to the visible; the soul is more similar than body to the invisible (b4–c1).
(8) The soul has intelligence when by itself alone it is concerned with Forms, and is confused when dealing (through the body) with particulars (c2–d7).

Therefore,
(C1) The soul is more similar to everlasting unchanging being than to its opposite (d8–e5).

[Supplementary argument] (79e8–80a5)
(S1) Soul rules the body; the body is the slave of soul.
(S2) The divine naturally rules, the mortal is naturally subject.

Therefore,
(C2) We are composed of (a) the soul which is most similar to what is divine, immortal, indestructible, of a single form, accessible to thought, ever constant and abiding true to itself; and (b) the body which is most similar to what is human, mortal, destructible, of many forms, inaccessible to thought, never constant nor abiding true to itself. (80a10–b6)

Therefore,
(C3) Body is liable to be quickly dissolved; soul must be completely indissoluble, ‘or something close to it’ (ἦ ἐγγύς τι τούτου; 80b10).

Do the three conclusions (C1–3) follow from the premises? From (5), (1) and (2), it follows that invisible things are unchanging, unchanging things in composite, and in composite things indissoluble (and the converse for visible things). Socrates’ interlocutors accept that Forms are invisible (4) as well as unchanging (3). By implication, they would also