CHAPTER SIX

THE FINAL ARGUMENT IN
PLATO’S PHAEDO

1. The ‘Second Voyage’

The final argument of Plato’s *Phaedo* has the best claim to offering a full proof of immortality in the dialogue, if we are to base our judgment on the reaction of the dialogue’s characters themselves. At 107a, Cebes is unable to find any objections to the argument, and even the more sceptical Simmias does not retain any doubts on its validity, while allowing for the possibility of human error (cf. 107a1: τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην ἀσθένειαν ἀτιμάζων). While Socrates’ conclusion to the argument encourages Simmias to revisit ‘the initial hypotheses’ (107b5) even if they appear certain, this does not detract from the confidence Socrates places in his logos. If Simmias should return to examine the initial hypotheses, he will need to ‘look for nothing more’. In my view, then, Socrates’ final demonstration should be taken as a serious argument which, in dramatic terms, is designed conclusively to dispel Cebes’ worry that soul may be dispersed at the point of death.

And here the problems begin. What is the most plausible construction of the dialogue’s final argument, and is Socrates right to present it as giving compelling reasons for the view that soul is immortal and imperishable? My main interest in the following will be Damascius’ interpretation of the final argument from *Phd*. 102a10–107a1. In order to assess our commentator’s construction of the argument, however, it will be necessary to go through the central stretch of text from 102a–107a. It is easily the most controversial part of the final argument, but not its beginning. Socrates approaches the question of immortality in a general way,

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1 Sedley (1995), 16f. makes the interesting suggestion that Simmias’ doubts over the validity of the final argument cast him as a misologist, whose penchant for quick agreement has turned into disillusionment over arguments in general.
with an inquiry into the causes of generation and destruction (96b9–10). In the account beginning at 96a6, Socrates tells of his fascination with the physiologia of his day, and the eventual realization that he has no talent for this kind of enquiry. The study of causes had unsettled his earlier, simple beliefs about the world. Examples of such beliefs are, that (i) growth is the result of food and drink, adding like matter to the living being (96c7–d6); (ii) a tall man is taller than a short man by ‘just one head’ (d8–e1); (iii) ten is more than eight by the addition of two (e1–3); and (iv) a two-yard long object is longer than one that is one yard long because it is one yard longer (e3–4). Single out for more detailed discussion (at 96e6ff.) are beliefs pertaining to (iii), concerning addition and division: two objects can be the result of the addition of two separate things, or of the separation into two of a single thing. Opposite causes, addition and separation, yield the same result, i.e. two. Puzzles of this sort had provoked Socrates to abandon the method of the natural philosophers, and to adopt instead a method of his own.

Socrates recounts his excitement on hearing that Anaxagoras had put forward the notion of Intelligence as a cause of everything, but to his disappointment finds merely physicalist explanations in the philosopher’s book (97b8ff.). Failure to learn about ‘the good and binding cause’ either by himself or from somebody else finally leads Socrates to his ‘second voyage in the quest for the cause’ (99c9–d1), the method of hypothesis.2 Detailed treatment of this important and controversial passage, however, would lead us too far away from the primary objective of this chapter, the Neoplatonic interpretation of the Phaedo’s final argument, and I will deal with specific sections of the text only where they are necessary to understand our commentators. Suffice it to say here that Socrates resolves the difficulties he had been unable to solve with the natural philosophers’ method by positing that each thing comes to be ‘by participating in the particular essence of each thing in which it participates’ (μετασχόν τῆς ἰδίας ὁμοίας ἐκάστου ὃν ἀν χαράκη; 101c2ff.). The participated entities in this context encompass a wide range of items, such as the beautiful itself by itself, as well as largeness, smallness and magnitude. They are

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2 For Proclus, the method of hypothesis is the highest form of dialectics, which shows the dialectician reasoning with himself and dealing neither with adversaries nor pupils. According to In Parm. 655.12–656.2, the Phaedo’s method is in agreement with that of the Parmenides. On Proclus’ theory of dialectics, see now Gritti (2008), 165–187.