From ‘Immortal’ to ‘Imperishable’: Damascius on the Final Argument in Plato’s Phaedo

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1 Introduction

The subject of this contribution is the final argument in Plato’s Phaedo, specifically the final section of the final argument (from 106c9–107a1), which has been called ‘the ultimate final argument’. It is in this part of the dialogue that readers have reasonably expected to find some grounds for inferring the soul’s imperishability from its immortality. As it happens, however, Socrates and his interlocutors fall short of providing anything like an explicit account of how we are supposed to move from ‘immortal’ to ‘imperishable’. That fact is, in itself, interesting, because it raises the possibility that the characters in the Phaedo work on assumptions that are not shared by their modern readers. What I hope to show here is that some ancient readers of the Phaedo were just as sceptical of the ‘ultimate final argument’ as many modern scholars are. The exchange between one of Plato’s most notorious critics in antiquity, namely Strato of Lampsacus, and, on the defence, the last Athenian Neoplatonist Damascius, is particularly instructive in this regard. Even Damascius, when trying to defend the Phaedo’s final argument, seems to agree that it does not fully rule out the possibility that the soul may perish when it is by itself, having been separated from the body.

2 The Final Argument

Before pursuing the debate between Strato, Damascius and his fellow Neoplatonists further, however, we need to take a closer look at the final argument in the Phaedo itself. It is introduced in response to Cebes’ worry earlier in the dialogue (at 86e6–88b8): even if it were granted that the soul may survive repeated incarnations, there is reason to fear that its arrival in the body (its ‘birth’) may be the beginning of its destruction and a sort of disease to which it eventually succumbs when becoming separate from one of its bodies (one of its ‘deaths’).

From the way Cebes puts his objection, and from Socrates’ later restatement of it, the main worry is that the soul will perish at the point of separating from the body, which in the dialogue is sometimes described as the soul’s ‘death’. Nothing that Cebes says suggests that he is concerned with the further possibility that the soul may perish after separating from the body when it is existing by itself. The way in which the question of the soul’s survival is set out by Cebes, in other words, should caution us to expect not a proof that there is no way in which the soul can perish, but rather a proof to the effect that one particular kind of perishing does not afflict the soul. And so it comes as no surprise that Socrates, in his reply to Cebes, is in the first instance concerned with showing that the soul does not perish at the point of separating itself from the body.\(^2\)

Socrates’ response to Cebes falls into two parts. First, he sets out to prove that the soul is immortal, in the sense that it is unable to receive death. This part of the argument makes use of the ‘subtler’ (105c2) method of explanation: when giving an account of that in virtue of which a body is hot, for example, one can say that ‘the body is hot because of fire’, rather than the tried and tested, ‘safe’ (105c1), account ‘it is hot because of hotness’. Applied to the case of soul, the subtler method of explanation allows one to say that just as fire always brings about the hot when it is present in bodies, soul always brings about life. And just as fire does not admit of the cold and is therefore ‘uncoolable’, so soul, which brings about life, does not admit of the opposite of what it brings about, death, and is therefore ‘deathless’. What this argument proves is not, as has sometimes been unfairly stated,\(^3\) that any living organism, i.e. a body that is brought to life by soul, is immortal, but rather that the individual soul, when the body dies, does not receive death but departs from it or perishes.

Up to this point, the argument is cogent enough. In the second part of the final argument, however, when Socrates undertakes to move from ‘deathless’ (immortal) to ‘imperishable’, all that one can assert with any degree of confidence is the conclusion of the argument (‘the soul is imperishable’), not, however, what the individual premises are, nor, consequently, whether the conclusion is validly inferred from them. The main thought behind this part of the argument is this: if one assumes that the immortal is imperishable, then the soul cannot perish whenever death attacks it, but will instead retreat, just as

\(^2\) Denis O’Brien, in a number of articles, has to my mind made a convincing argument to this effect. We may thus attribute some of the argument’s apparent shortcomings to the fact that it is designed to solve only Cebes’ particular problem, rather than proving that soul cannot perish in any way whatsoever. See most recently D. O’Brien, ‘Immortel et impérissable dans le Phédon de Platon’, *International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 1/2, 2007, 109–262.