PLATO’S PHAEDO AS PROTREPTIC

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I

The thesis of this paper is that the arguments for immortality in the Phaedo are subordinate to Plato’s overall protreptic purpose. To put the matter more provocatively, the Phaedo is better read as a hell-fire and damnation sermon than as a collection of arguments for the immortality of the soul. I thus attach particular importance to the words given to Socrates at 107C:

It is right to think then, gentlemen, that if the soul is immortal, it requires our care not only for the time we call our life, but for the sake of all time, and that one is in terrible danger if one does not give it that care. If death were escape from everything, it would be a great boon to the wicked to get rid of the body and of their wickedness together with their soul. But now that the soul appears to be immortal, there is no escape from evil or salvation for it except by becoming as good and wise as possible… 107CD

Plato’s overriding concern in the Phaedo, as indeed elsewhere, is the production of good men. He sees that although it may not be possible to argue men into goodness, it may be possible to frighten them into it. The arguments are less a promise than a threat.

Such an approach to the Phaedo does not detract from the importance of the arguments for immortality regarded simply as arguments, but it serves to show that such arguments are not ends in themselves; they are subordinate to Plato’s desire to exhort us to the practice of virtue. If he intends to bring home to us the prospect of rewards and punishments in a future life, he needs first to persuade us that there actually is a future life. He can then proceed to advise us how to obtain its rewards and avoid its punishments.

1 Translations of passages in the Phaedo are taken from the version by G.M.A. Grube, Indianapolis, 1977.
Plato has of course other methods of protreptic. One of them is to try to make the good so attractive that we will have to fall in love with it. Another is to try to show that only the good man is happy. Still another, and this is an important feature of our dialogue, is to hold out the ontological and epistemological lure that only the good man can know the Forms. With these preliminary thoughts in mind, I shall now try to argue the protreptic nature of the *Phaedo* in more detail.

II

I shall start with the definition of death at 64C. Socrates says, and Simmias agrees, that death is nothing other than “the separation of the soul from the body;” more emphatically, “the body comes to be separated by itself apart from the soul, and the soul comes to be separated by itself apart from the body.”

There are two immediate comments to be made about this definition. One is that, if it be accepted, the succeeding arguments for immortality are in danger of becoming otiose: if death means that “the soul comes to be separated by itself apart from the body,” then death already implies immortality and we may not need any proofs for it. The second is that, if immortality be implied by the very act of dying, what is the point of all this talk in the *Phaedo* of the necessity for the practice of dying?

This latter question has of course a clear answer in the *Phaedo*’s own terms: we need to practice death so as to be sure of getting clean away, or to put it the other way about, of getting away clean. But I also want to suggest that although the question has a clear answer, it ought not to have, given Plato’s just-cited definition of death. Anyone can die, indeed we all must, so why practice what cannot be avoided, especially as his definition implies that one death means no greater separation than another?

Plato is obviously entangled in a theological problem as old as human nature and human thought: the wicked all too often appear to flourish and the good to suffer. But suppose that the next life holds out a reward for the good and punishment for the wicked? This is much more satisfactory. Furthermore, it then makes sense to exhort mankind to choose goodness.

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2 See especially 81BE and 108AB.