The role of the hypothetical method
in the Phaedo*

J. T. BEDU-ADDO

Introduction

The hypothetical method is introduced just before the final proof of the immortality of the soul (102a-107a). Of all the various arguments adduced in the Phaedo in support of the immortality of the soul, Plato undoubtedly regarded the last one as the most satisfactory and convincing. The arguments in the first two-thirds of the dialogue do indeed have a certain persuasive force; but a searching objection from Cebes (86d-88b) seems to make everything doubtful again. Granted that the soul enjoys ante-natal existence, it has yet to be proved that it is wholly immortal and indestructible. It is only then that one may feel confident in the face of death:

Anyone who feels confident in the face of death must be a fool, unless he can prove that the soul is wholly immortal and indestructible (88b).

In his résumé of Cebes' objection (95b-e), Socrates\(^1\) shows a clear appreciation of the fact that on the basis of the arguments thus far adduced, even if his own belief in the immortality of the soul were true, it would still fall short of knowledge:

For, if anyone does not know (eido\(n\)) that the soul is immortal, and cannot give an account of this, it is fitting for him to be afraid, unless he is a fool (95d).

Since Socrates obviously does not consider himself a simpleton, and is indeed portrayed throughout the dialogue as being quite unperturbed by the prospect of his own impending death, we may safely assume that he thinks he knows that the soul is immortal, and can give an account of this. Thus it seems quite reasonable to suppose that he intends the final argument to give precisely the account that will make the immortality of the

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soul a matter not merely of probability but of knowledge in the strict sense of the word — ἔπιστήμη, i.e. the mind’s acquaintance with Forms including the Good as described earlier by Socrates both in the section on the philosopher’s ‘practice of death’ (65a-66a) and in the section on the theory of recollection (75c-77a).

Now, it has been strenuously denied that Socrates’ ‘second voyage’ has anything whatever to do with teleology;2 and, indeed, the relevance of Socrates’ description of the hypothetical method itself in the Phaedo has been seriously doubted.3 This description of the hypothetical method, however, is not uncommonly discussed and interpreted in complete isolation from the doctrines of the earlier sections of the dialogue, namely the philosopher’s ‘practice of death’, i.e. the philosopher’s use of pure reason without the aid of the senses to attain knowledge of Forms including the Good, and the theory of recollection. In the following discussion, I propose to show by a detailed examination of the passage on method that Socrates’ description of the hypothetical method is, in effect, a description of the philosopher’s ‘practice of death’, and that it is at once a general statement of method and the description of his ‘second voyage’ in search of the cause of generation, existence, and destruction, namely, the Good.

1. ἔργα, λόγοι and ὑποθέσεις

Having re-stated Cebes’ objection, Socrates observes — after a long pause intended presumably to indicate both the importance and difficulty of the final proof — that to answer Cebes’ objection is not an easy matter, for he must go into the whole question of the cause4 of generation and destruction (85e). The discussion begins with the well-known ‘autobiographical’ passage (96a-99d) in which Socrates recounts his intellectual pilgrimage starting from his youthful preoccupation with the method of the physicists and culminating in his failure to discover the Good which he thought must be the cause of all generation, existence and destruction. Then follows an account of his subsequent invention of a new method for the investigation of the nature of that cause:

That the Good and the necessary do truly bind and hold things together they have no inkling. Now, I would very much like to learn from anybody the truth about this sort of cause; but since I was deprived of it, and could neither discover it for myself, nor learn it from anyone else, would you like me, Cebes, to show you how I have conducted my second voyage in search of the cause? (99d).

Immediately after this passage, Socrates proceeds to introduce the hypothetical method as a method of studying ‘the truth of realities’ (τὰ