

*The Method of Hypothesis and the Nature of Soul in Plato's Phaedo* 1

Let it not escape us that arguments from the principles and those to the principles are different. For Plato, too, properly used to raise this problem and inquire whether we are proceeding from the ἀρχαί or to the ἀρχαί.

– Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I 4.1095<sup>a</sup>30–3

## 1 Introduction

Not so long ago, discussions of the arguments on behalf of the soul's immortality in Plato's *Phaedo* were prone to involve the type of fallacy-hunting once a favorite sport among certain analytically inclined historians of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> One might reasonably wonder why in this dialogue Plato presents a string of what many have regarded as transparently poor arguments for such an important view. Presumably the reason is not because he could do no better. In the *Phaedrus* he formulates an argument on behalf of the soul's immortality generally judged superior to the arguments in the *Phaedo*. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato argues that since the nature or essence of soul is to be a self-mover, or the source and principle of its own change, it must be both ungenerated and imperishable, which is to say immortal (*Phdr.* 245c5–246a2).<sup>2</sup> The superiority of the *Phaedrus*' single argument to the multiple arguments of the *Phaedo* prompts a number of questions. Why do the *Phaedo*'s arguments fall short of this argument's high standard? Is there a proper philosophical explanation, as opposed to merely a developmental one? Why does the *Phaedo* present a whole series of arguments on behalf of the soul's immortality, when apparently a single argument might have sufficed? These questions may be answered, and several other issues regarding the *Phaedo*'s beleaguered arguments may be resolved, by coming to understand how the dialogue's arguments are functioning in accordance with its own method of hypothesis.

Plato is a philosopher whose writings often develop methodological and substantive concerns simultaneously and in an interconnected manner. He does so, of course, through the dramatic medium of the dialogue, whereby he engages with his readers by presenting a fictionalized discussion between a group of figures with their own characteristic perspectives and commitments. Failure to attend sufficiently to the interplay between the methodological, substantive, or dramatic dimensions of his writings is likely to result in a distorted or impoverished understanding of Plato's thought. A good deal of

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Keyt 1963, Bostock 1986, Weller 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Despite its superiority, the *Phaedrus* argument has received less attention than the *Phaedo* arguments. Bett 1986 provides the best analysis along with references to earlier treatments, among which Hackforth 1952, 64–8, and Robinson 1971 may be singled out. Blyth 1997 also provides a detailed reconstruction, though the accompanying discussion is far too speculative. Mansfeld 2014 debunks the view that Plato's view of the soul as a self-mover was influenced by Alcmaeon.

attention has been paid in recent years to the significance of the dramatic and other literary dimensions of the Platonic dialogues.<sup>3</sup> Although attention will be paid here as well to the dramatic dimension of the *Phaedo*, particularly as exemplified in the responses of its figures to the main arguments, the principal focus will be on the interplay between the dialogue's methodological and substantive dimensions. Attention to a Platonic dialogue's methodological dimension is often critical for resolving apparent problems in the development of its substantive concerns. It is especially important to bear this point in mind when approaching the arguments of the *Phaedo*.

One of the *Phaedo*'s outstanding problems concerns the relation between the methodological principles articulated in Socrates' so-called intellectual autobiography (*Phd.* 95a4–102a9) and the themes pursued in the remainder of the dialogue. While useful connections have been drawn, for instance, between Socrates' desire for teleological explanation and the subsequent eschatological myth,<sup>4</sup> and likewise between his discussion of Forms as causal or explanatory principles and their role elsewhere in the dialogue (especially in the final argument),<sup>5</sup> there is as yet insufficient appreciation of the direct connection between the hypothetical method introduced in the autobiography and the dialectical progression of Plato's arguments on behalf of the soul's immortality.<sup>6</sup> In what follows, therefore, I articulate and explore the connection by first drawing attention to some of the indications in the *Phaedo* that its principal arguments are functioning as something other than proofs. I proceed to discuss the purpose for which Plato originally introduces the hypothetical method in the *Meno*, identify certain expectations this purpose raises with respect to the role of this method in the *Phaedo*, and consider at some length the extent to which these expectations are borne out by its arguments. I conclude with some reflections on the epistemic situation of Socrates and his interlocutors in the *Phaedo* and on the thematic role of myth in the dialogue.

In the course of the discussion, it will become apparent that the *Phaedo*'s arguments on behalf of the soul's immortality are "dialectical" in two senses. In one, the primary sense, they are dialectical in that they function in accordance with the hypothetical method of inquiry, which has by this time supplanted the Socratic elenchus as Plato's favored mode of inquiry. They are also dialectical

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Griswold 1988, Frede 1992, Blondell 2002. On the interplay between the literary and philosophical aspects of the *Phaedo* in particular see Ausland 1997, Bacon 1990, and Rowe 1993b. Rowe usefully focuses on how Socrates' interlocutors respond to his arguments.

<sup>4</sup> See Sedley 1991. <sup>5</sup> See Politis 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Bedu-Addo 1979 connects Socrates' description of the hypothetical method to his description of the philosopher's practice of death earlier in the dialogue. Kanayama 2000 tries to understand how Socrates' descriptions of the method of hypothesis at *Phd.* 100a3–7, 101d1–e3, and 107b5–9 bear upon the final argument.

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in that these arguments appear designed to provide at least some of the training in argumentation required if one is not to succumb to the distrust of reasoning or “misology” that Plato has Socrates warn against (*Phd.* 90b–e). Because the dialogue’s main arguments are dialectical in these two senses, they function in subtle ways and on multiple levels that are easy to mistake or misunderstand. It should be plain that they are not meant to function as proofs of the soul’s immortality, for the dialogue actually thematizes their status as something other than proofs in numerous ways. As a result, their role in supporting belief in immortality is itself problematized, though in philosophically interesting ways of which Plato himself was surely aware.

## 2 The Inconclusive Character of the *Phaedo*’s Arguments

Although modern commentators typically speak of the *Phaedo*’s arguments as “proofs,” there are sufficient indications within the dialogue that they are not intended to function as such. One *prima facie* sign that they are not so designed is the presence of a series of arguments for the soul’s immortality. For the purpose of proof, a single argument, such as one finds in the *Phaedrus*, would have sufficed.<sup>7</sup> There is evidence, moreover, that already in antiquity certain Platonists clearly appreciated that at least some of the *Phaedo*’s earlier arguments could not have been intended by Plato as decisive proofs. Thus Damascius, at the outset of his own extended treatment of the argument from opposites in his *Phaedo* commentary,<sup>8</sup> criticizes the explication of Iamblichus for “attempting to lend [the argument] such completeness as to constitute absolute proof of the immortality of the soul (εἰς ὅσον ἀποδείξει παντελῆ τὴν ψυχῆς ἀθανασία), which is more than Socrates himself dared to presume it could do” (*in Phd.* I 207, trans. Westerink). Noting the way Socrates introduces the argument by asking whether they should discuss “whether these things are likely (εἰκόσ) to be the case or not” (*Phd.* 70b5–7), Damascius suggests instead that the argument is “true in the sense that it proves a possibility (ὡς ἀληθῆς τὲ ἐστὶ καὶ ἐνδεχομένως ἀληθῆς)” (*in Phd.* I 207, trans. Westerink). While his characterization of the argument’s positive purpose is questionable, Damascius’ view that the argument is not intended to function as a decisive proof merits sympathy. One might in fact be inclined to extend something like this view to all the dialogue’s arguments prior to Cebes’ and Simmias’ objections (*Phd.* 85e3–

<sup>7</sup> This problem motivates the proposal of Lesser 2003 that the *Phaedo* does not actually contain multiple arguments for the soul’s immortality but a single argument presented in stages. Even if this proposed solution is implausible, the problem is nonetheless real.

<sup>8</sup> Dam. *in Phd.* I 207–52. Whereas it is now standard to see *Phd.* 70c4–72d10 as comprising three distinct arguments, Damascius speaks of them collectively as “the argument from opposites (ὁ ἀπὸ τῶν ἐναντίων λόγος).”