PLATO’S ARGUMENTS FOR THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL I: THE ARGUMENT FROM OPPOSITES COMING FROM OPPOSITES (FROM PHAEDO 70C-72E)

Let us approach it from this point of view. Do the souls of the departed exist in another world or not? There is an old legend, which we still remember, to the effect that they do exist there, after leaving here, and that they return again to this world and come into being from the dead. If this is so – that the living come into being again from the dead – does it not follow that our souls exist in the other world? They could not come into being again if they did not exist, and it will be sufficient proof that my contention is true if it really becomes apparent that the living come from the dead, and from nowhere else. But if this is not so, we shall need some other argument.

Quite so, said Cebes.

If you want to understand the question more readily, said Socrates, consider it with reference not only to human beings but to all animals and plants. Let us see whether in general everything that admits of generation is generated in this way and no other – opposites from opposites, wherever there is an opposite – as for instance beauty is opposite to ugliness and right to wrong, and there are countless other examples. Let us consider whether it is a necessary law that everything which has an opposite is generated from that opposite and from no other source. For example, when a thing becomes bigger, it must, I suppose, have been smaller first before it became bigger?

Yes.

And similarly if it becomes smaller, it must be bigger first, and become smaller afterward?

That is so, said Cebes.

And the weaker comes from the stronger, and the faster from the slower?

Certainly.

One more instance. If a thing becomes worse, is it not from being better? And if more just, from being more unjust?

Of course.

Are we satisfied, then, said Socrates, that everything is generated in this way – opposites from opposites?

Perfectly.

Here is another question. Do not these examples present another feature, that between each pair of opposites there are two processes of generation, one from the first to the second, and another from the second to the first? Between a larger and a smaller object are there not the processes of increase and decrease, and do we not describe them in this way as increasing and decreasing?

Yes, said Cebes.

Is it not the same with separating and combining, cooling and heating, and all the rest of them? Even if we sometimes do not use the actual terms, must it not in fact hold good universally that they come one from the other, and that there is a process of generation from each to the other?

Certainly, said Cebes.

Well then, said Socrates, is there an opposite to living, as sleeping is opposite to waking?

Certainly.

What?

Being dead.

So if they are opposites, they come from one another, and have their two processes of generation between the two of them?

Of course.

Very well, then, said Socrates, I will state one pair of opposites which I mentioned just now – the opposites themselves and the processes between them – and you shall state the other. My opposites are sleeping and waking, and I say that waking comes from sleeping and sleeping from waking, and that the processes between them are going to sleep and waking up. Does that satisfy you, he asked, or not?

Perfectly.

Now you tell me in the same way, he went on, about life and death. Do you not admit that death is the opposite of life?
I do.
And that they come from one another?
Yes.
Then what comes from the living?
The dead.
And what, asked Socrates, comes from the dead?
I must admit, he said, that it is the living.
So it is from the dead, Cebes, that living things and people come?
Evidently.
Then our souls do exist in the next world.
So it seems.
And one of the two processes in this case is really quite certain – dying is certain enough, isn’t it?
Yes, it is, said Cebes.
What shall we do, then? Shall we omit the complementary process, and leave a defect here in the law of nature? Or must we supply an opposite process to that of dying?
Surely we must supply it, he said.
And what is it?
Coming to life again.
Then if there is such a thing as coming to life again, said Socrates, it must be a process from death to life?
Quite so.
So we agree upon this too – that the living have come from the dead no less than the dead from the living. But I think we decided that if this was so, it was a sufficient proof that the souls of the dead must exist in some place from which they are reborn.
It seems to me, Socrates, he said, that this follows necessarily from our agreement.
I think there is another way too, Cebes, in which you can see that we were not wrong in our agreement.
If there were not a constant correspondence in the process of generation between the two sets of opposites, going round in a sort of cycle, if generation were a straight path to the opposite extreme without any return to the starting point or any deflection, do you realize that in the end everything would have the same quality and reach the same state, and change would cease altogether?
What do you mean?
Nothing difficult to understand, replied Socrates. For example, if ‘falling asleep’ existed, and ‘waking up’ did not balance it by making something come out of sleep, you must realize that in the end everything would make Endymion look foolish. He would be nowhere, because the whole world would be in the same state – asleep. And if everything were combined and nothing separated, we should soon have Anaxagoras’ ‘all things together.’ In just the same way, my dear Cebes, if everything that has some share of life were to die, and if after death the dead remained in that form and did not come to life again, would it not be quite inevitable that in the end everything should be dead and nothing alive? If living things came from other living things, and the living things died, what possible means could prevent their number from being exhausted by death?
None that I can see, Socrates, said Cebes. What you say seems to be perfectly true.
Yes, Cebes, he said, if anything is true, I believe that this is, and we were not mistaken in our agreement upon it. Coming to life again is a fact, and it is a fact that the living come from the dead, and a fact that the souls of the dead exist.