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The End of Plato's *Phaedo* and the End(s) of Philosophy

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Abstract: The ending of the *Phaedo* is one of the most powerful and memorable moments in the entire Platonic corpus. It is not simply the end of a single dialogue, but a depiction of the end of the life of the man (Socrates) who is a looming presence in nearly everything that Plato wrote. In this article I offer an in-depth analysis of the final scene of the *Phaedo*. I argue that Plato very carefully constructs the scene for the sake of specific philosophical, dramatic, and political ends. Plato uses it to unify the *Phaedo* as a singular text, while also provoking us to reflect on the nature of our lives, our deaths, and the possibilities and limits of philosophy itself.

Keywords: plato, phaedo, socrates

The final scene of the *Phaedo* is one of the most powerful and memorable moments in the entire Platonic corpus. It is not simply the end of a single dialogue, but a depiction of the end of the life of the man (Socrates) who is a looming presence in nearly everything that Plato wrote. Indeed the final scene is—unusually for a Platonic dialogue—grounded on the concrete and the particular, offering us a glimpse of a prison cell with family interaction, bodily breakdown, and grieving and crying friends. My aim in this paper is to offer an in-depth interpretation of the significance and structure of the final scene.

In my view, the ending of the *Phaedo* is not simply an attempt at reportage or historical biography; it is, rather, a scene that Plato very carefully constructs (albeit based on an actual event) for the sake of specific philosophical, dramatic, and political ends. Granted that Socrates' death is the inevitable ending of the *Phaedo*, nonetheless Plato makes some very clear authorial choices as to how to present that death to us. A careful examination of the scene reveals that it calls attention to (and reinforces) almost all of the major themes of the *Phaedo*, which in turn helps to unify the dialogue as a whole. In particular, the final scene dramatically shows us—and does not merely tell us—what it means to have a

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good death, and correspondingly, what it means to have a good life (a life informed by the appropriate philosophical perspective and priorities).

After discussing the final scene and its significance, in the final part of this paper I will step back to consider the broader question of ‘endings’ in relation to philosophy itself. Naturally, every text (such as the *Phaedo*) and every life (such as Socrates’) must come to an end, but is there any end-point or “final chapter” to philosophy itself? Considered in terms of the social and political world that *actually* exists now, the *Phaedo* seems to suggest not. However, there is a *conceivable* (albeit unlikely) state of affairs in which philosophy does have an ending, which the *Phaedo* intimates. In this way, the dialogue as a whole—right up to its final moment—encourages us to reflect on the possibilities and limits of philosophy itself.

Myth and the Final Scene

There is some ambiguity when speaking of the “ending” of the *Phaedo*. Given that most of the *Phaedo* consists of a series of arguments and a dialogical inquiry into immortality, one kind of ending is represented by Socrates’ detailed eschatological myth (107c–114c), in which he gives an account of the fate and journeys of the soul after death. Although the myth is not the literal *end* of the dialogue—it does not constitute the last words of the *Phaedo*—it does mark a discursive break from the preceding discussion, and serves as a transition to Socrates’ final moments. This is not to say that the myth signals the ‘conclusion’ of the inquiry into immortality in any ultimate sense—Socrates himself notes that the first hypotheses of his arguments require re-examination, no matter how convincing they might appear (107b). In this sense, the inquiry into immortality has no ‘ending’, and is meant to be ongoing (a point to which I shall return later). But, no doubt cognizant of the impending hour of his death, Socrates realizes that the inquiry must have an ending *for now* (and most especially *for him*), and his foray into myth-making marks the moment at which that provisional ending occurs.

The significance of the myth and Plato’s reasons for using myth are not my concern here, as I have dealt with those issues elsewhere.¹ For present purposes, what is relevant is what I have previously called the *metanarrative* role of Platonic myth: that is, the way in which the myths serve to call attention to

¹ Werner (2012). An excellent study of the myth of the *Phaedo* can also be found in Edmonds (2004).

the status and limits of philosophical discourse, including Plato's own dialogues. In particular, the inclusion of a myth that is explicitly marked as such—marked, that is, as a kind of traditional tale²—serves to draw our attention to the way in which Plato's *own* dialogues are a kind of myth. In saying this, I am not suggesting that the dialogues are *pure* fiction or fabrications without any historical grounding, for clearly many of the individual depicted in the dialogues correspond to actual persons. But the dialogues are fiction nonetheless, depicting conversations that likely never took place (at least in the form represented), and incorporating a complex array of dramatic and literary elements in order to serve the author's (Plato's) various ends. The Platonic dialogue is a kind of stylized artifice, in other words, and Plato is making clear choices as to how he presents it to us.

I now want to suggest that the final scene of the *Phaedo* (the death scene) is a case in point of this kind of artifice—it is a constructed narrative which Plato uses for particular ends. Obviously Socrates did in fact die in a prison cell as a result of drinking hemlock, and was surrounded by his companions as he did so. So the account of Socrates' death in the *Phaedo* no doubt contains *some* historical accuracy. But it is also the case—or so I hope to show—that his last hour did not occur in *exactly* in the way that Plato depicts it, and is a carefully crafted version of events in much the way that Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Socrates* is. In fact Plato himself goes out of his way to alert us to the fact that the *Phaedo* is not a straightforward recording of events: the entire dialogue is cast in the form of a narration from Phaedo (who was present) to Echecrates (who was not present), and it is mentioned right at the outset that *Plato was not there* (59b).³ Now it is all but certain that Plato did not intend the *Phaedo* to be a literal, word-for-word transcription of an actual conversation that took place between Phaedo and Echecrates.⁴ Yet even if we *were* inclined to think of the

2 In the case of the *Phaedo*, Socrates attributes his myth to unnamed others (λέγεται, 107d5); and the narrative incorporates a mix of elements from traditional Greek mythology, Orphism, and other sources.

3 The reason for Plato's absence is said to be illness. As Davis (1980: 71n) notes, there is irony in the fact (if it is indeed a fact) that Plato was absent due to *illness*, since it indicates a concern for the maintenance and healing of the body—a concern that may be in tension with the seeming other-worldliness and disdain for the body that is expressed throughout the *Phaedo*. One wonders what kind of illness would have been serious enough to prevent Plato from being present on Socrates' final day.

4 Among other things, the *Phaedo* contains a number of views—such as the Theory of Forms, the doctrine of recollection, and the theory of reincarnation—which were likely never entertained or espoused by the historical Socrates. Naturally, then, the entirety of the *Phaedo* is a kind of construct created by Plato. What I hope to show in this paper is that the final scene is

Phaedo as historical reportage, the introduction of *Phaedo* as the narrator reminds us that we are still at quite a remove from the actual events of the day, as we would be wholly reliant on *Phaedo*'s memory of those events (which took place at some unnamed time in the past).⁵ What we have, then, is a fictionalized report of a report. As readers, we—like Plato and Echecrates before us—would like to know what “really” happened on Socrates' last day; but from the outset the *Phaedo* dashes any hope we might have of satisfying that desire.

As if to reinforce this point, *in the final scene itself* Plato has the outer frame interrupt the flow of the drama. At 116a, at the moment when (in the narration) Socrates leaves the room to take his bath and spend some final time with his family, *Phaedo* re-injects the first-person to describe what *he* was doing while the bath took place (namely, continuing in conversation); and again at 117c, when *Phaedo* describes his own inability to hold back the tears when Socrates took the hemlock.⁶ Momentarily, then, our attention shifts away from narrated events and toward the narrator, and we are reminded that what we are being given is an *image* of Socrates and not the “real thing”.⁷ Socrates (or rather, “Socrates”) himself may betray a sly awareness of this fact when, at 115a, he says that “my fated day calls me now, as a tragic character [ἄνθρωπος τραγικός] might say.” Though there is some irony here, Socrates is indeed a tragic figure at this moment—a man who is being put to death unjustly, as a result of an irrational mob. More than that, Socrates becomes—through the artifice of Plato's writing—a *re-figuring* of the tragic heroes of the Greek tradition, someone who cheerfully accepts his fate rather than bemoaning it or cursing it or weeping and wailing. He is thus indeed a *character*, a literary construction or ideal type meant to replace the traditional type of myth.

Yet even if these metanarrative cues and elaborate framing were not present in the *Phaedo*, there would still be clear indications that the dialogue was a

one place where Plato vividly calls our attention to this fact, thereby encouraging us to deconstruct his textual construction.

5 In keeping with the discussion that takes place, *Phaedo*'s narration is a *recollection* of a prior λόγος (Prufer [1986]). Ought we regard *Phaedo* here as a symbolic stand-in for Plato himself? Perhaps. Plato no doubt consulted others who were present, so as to verify key details and form a clearer picture of the events. But he still would have been reliant on others' testimonies and memories.

6 Apart from the opening scene and the dramatic break at 88e–89b, this is the only other point where the outer frame breaks into the conversation. Structurally, then, we are given meta-reminders at the beginning, middle, and end of the dialogue.

7 This layering of the *Phaedo* is neatly consistent with its message. For if the ‘true self’ is the soul—that which cannot be perceived by the senses—then so too Socrates' ‘true self’ is not such as could possibly be presented (or represented) in a written text or in one's memories (cf. Burger [1984: 209]).

constructed tale. The *Phaedo* is said to take place over the course of an entire day, from sunrise (59d) to sunset (116e) on one of the longest days of the year.⁸ That amounts to over fourteen hours of daylight, yet Plato's narrative focuses almost exclusively on what was *said* and *debated* during that time, with no mention made of other mundane activities that would undoubtedly have occurred.⁹ This selective attention on Plato's part—the emphasizing of certain elements over others—becomes especially apparent in the final scene when we arrive at the depiction of Socrates' death. As is well known, the method of Socrates' execution is that he must drink a potion containing the poisonous plant hemlock (*conium maculatum*). Modern medical and toxicological accounts of hemlock poisoning are fairly consistent in their descriptions.¹⁰ The poison acts on the peripheral nervous system. Symptoms of poisoning become apparent within one to two hours after ingestion, and may include burning in the mouth, salivating, nausea, vomiting, stomach pains, diarrhea, headache, dilation of the pupils, lack of coordination, confusion, sweating, difficulty in breathing, inability to swallow, diplopia, coldness of the extremities, cyanosis, drowsiness, muscle tremors, convulsions or seizures, muscular weakness, paralysis, and coma. Death typically occurs several hours after ingestion, as a result of respiratory paralysis (asphyxia).

Let us now compare these contemporary medical descriptions with what we find in the *Phaedo*. In Plato's telling, Socrates drinks the poison, walks around the room for a little while, and lies down when he begins to feel it taking effect; he then covers his head, and soon loses consciousness and dies (offering his famous last words to Asclepius right before doing so) (117d–118a). Plato's account implies that Socrates experienced a few relatively benign symptoms—heaviness in the legs (βαρύνεσθαι, 117e4) followed by numbness that works its way from the lower extremities upwards (117e7–118a2; ψύχοιτό τε καὶ πῆγνυτο, 118a2)—and makes no mention of any of the other, more violent and dramatic

8 The Delian festival fell around May 20th, and Socrates' execution is said to have taken place thirty days after that (Xenophon *Mem* 4.8.2). (Geddes 1885: 183–4; also cf. White [1989: 273] and Burnet [1911: 144].)

9 The text gives us the impression that Socrates remained seated, with his feet on the ground, *for the entire time* (61d). But is it plausible to think that he sat and talked for fourteen hours straight, without even a single break for eating, stretching his legs, or going to the bathroom?

10 Frohne and Pfänder (2005); True and Dreisbach (2002); Turner and Szczawinski (1991); Frank et al. (1995); Drummer et al. (1995); Vetter (2004); Lampe et al. (1985); Nelson et al. (2007); and Ober (1982). Nowadays, a person can survive hemlock poisoning if s/he is provided artificial respiration while the toxins work their way out of the body. A truly excellent and informative discussion of hemlock poisoning and the final scene of the *Phaedo* is to be found in Bloch (2002).

effects of hemlock ingestion.¹¹ Moreover, the process of Socrates' dying is relatively quick—seemingly a matter of minutes—in contrast to the hours-long process indicated in modern medical accounts. All in all, as one commentator put it, Socrates' death amounts to “a process of calm, almost rhythmic regularity.”¹²

To what extent, then, is Plato really giving us an accurate picture of Socrates' death? (And to what extent was it even his *intention* to do so?) It is impossible to answer this question with any conclusiveness, given the absence of any other witness accounts as well as uncertainty surrounding the precise way in which the poison was prepared. One scholar has argued that hemlock poisoning results in an ascending paralysis which would nowadays be recognized as being of the Guillain-Barré type; as such, she thinks that Plato's account is perfectly in line with what death-by-hemlock would look like, and hence is completely accurate.¹³ But I think that we should be cautious about accepting such a conclusion, at least with any certitude. The same evidence (from contemporary medical accounts) which might support a belief that Socrates' death was in fact peaceful—as Plato describes it—could equally support a belief that his death contained elements of serious pain and nastiness.¹⁴ And while I would not accuse Plato of outright *lying* about Socrates' death—i. e. inventing physical symptoms which never occurred—neither can it be ruled out that Plato *omitted* certain details of Socrates' dying process.¹⁵ Indeed, given (as noted earlier) the compressed time frame of the *Phaedo*, we must admit that Plato omitted *lots* of details from Socrates' final day—the only real question is which ones. I conclude, then, that although Plato's account of Socrates' death *might* be 100% accurate, it likely is not; and as such, Plato was making deliberate choices as to what to mention and what to ignore. He was, in other

¹¹ The brief reference to a “movement” (ἐκινήθη [note the passive voice]) may suggest another symptom, convulsions; but if so, it is presented here in the most benign and euphemistic way.

¹² Gill (1973: 25).

¹³ Bloch (2002).

¹⁴ Cf. the medical/toxicological references cited in n. 10 above—esp. the case studies of Drummer and Frank—all of which mention vomiting, for instance. This is one reason why I cannot endorse the total certitude with which Bloch (2002) makes her claims (e. g. her claim that “Plato proves to have been entirely accurate in every clinical detail” [p. 258], or that the truth of Plato's account is established “beyond the shadow of a doubt” [p. 263]).

¹⁵ Bloch (2002: 257) seems to ignore this distinction. She questions why Plato would have *distorted* the details of Socrates' death, especially given that so many of his contemporaries would have been there as witnesses. But omission is not the same thing as distortion. Relatedly, her basis for *wanting* to have trust in Plato's veracity—viz., that without such trust “his entire picture of the life and personality of Socrates, as well as many other of his observations, also must come under deep suspicion” (256)—begs the question.

words, offering us a selective story (μῦθος) as to the details of Socrates' last day and the manner of Socrates' death.

If (as I have argued) the final scene of the *Phaedo* is a stylized and constructed tale, then a new question arises: *which* choices does Plato make in his construction of the scene, and *why* does he make *those* choices (and not others)? In other words, *how* does Plato frame the scene, and what might be his *point* or *goal* in doing so?¹⁶ My aim in the remainder of this article is to answer these questions. Plato's goal, I believe, is to show us something about the nature of a 'good death'—and correspondingly, the nature of a 'good life'. He does so by subtly framing the final scene in such a way as recall many of the major themes and claims of the preceding dialogue. In this way, the final scene reinforces earlier ideas, encourages us to reflect back on them, and helps to unify the *Phaedo* as a single text. But in addition to this textual or dialogical function, the final scene is designed to directly engage us as readers as part of the drama, and to "bring home" those ideas and in turn provoke our own self-reflection.

The Good Death

At least part of Plato's aim in the final scene is to show us what a *good death* looks like. There are in fact two ways in which we can refer to a "good death", both of which are relevant to the ending of the *Phaedo*. In one sense, a death can be good in terms of what it *leads to*, that is, if it leads to a *better* situation than what is experienced here in earthly life. This idea is clearly prominent throughout the *Phaedo*. Early in the dialogue, Socrates says that he expects to join the company of good men and good masters (gods) after death (63b–c), and as such he is not resentful or fearful. In general, according to Socrates, death is a good thing since it represents a separation of the soul from the body; and that separation, in turn, is a good thing since it is the only state in which reason can gain unmediated access to the Forms, thereby satisfying our desire for knowledge of the ultimate reality (66d–67a). While we are incarnate, by contrast, the body is both a distraction from the pursuit of knowledge and a hindrance in the attainment of knowledge (66b–d). Notice, however, that death is not unequivocally good in this sense for *everyone*. According to Socrates, most people die with a "polluted and impure"

¹⁶ I do take it as a basic principle of interpretation of Platonic dialogues that *what* is said is no more or less important than *how* it is said; that seemingly innocuous elements of the text—such as setting, characterization, imagery, and the like—are the result of an authorial choice, and as such carry potential meaning.

soul—polluted by its associations with the body and lack of virtue—and as a result their post-mortem state of separation is but a temporary one, as they are then subject to reincarnation (81b–82b). It is only the philosophers, who have sufficiently “purified” and “prepared” themselves during life, who attain a permanently discarnate status after death (80d–81a; 114c).

In the final scene of the *Phaedo* Plato clearly suggests that Socrates’ death will be good in this sense. Notice that Socrates drinks the hemlock while the sun is still shining (for it has not yet fallen below the hills, 116e). One hardly needs to have read much of Plato to recognize his association of sun/light with what is good, which implies here that the present event (Socrates’ death) is potentially a positive one.¹⁷ Apart from the setting, there are a number of indications in the final scene that Socrates himself thinks (or at least hopes) that his post-mortem state will be a good one. For instance, although Socrates does not insist on the truth of all of the details of the eschatological myth—and in fact says that *no sensible person* (οὐβ ἔχοντι ἀνδρῖ) would do so—he does think it worthwhile to risk the belief (ἄξιον κινδυνεῦσαι, 114d5) that “either this or something like this” (ἢ ταῦτ’ ἐστὶν ἢ τοιαῦτ’ ἄττα, d2–3) is true regarding the soul; and he thinks one should repeat this belief to oneself “as if it were an incantation” (χρηὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα ὥσπερ ἐπάδειν ἑαυτῷ, d6–7). Indeed, it is precisely with this incantatory aim that Socrates has offered such a lengthy myth in the first place (d7), and he implies that all of the various arguments of the *Phaedo* (regarding the soul’s immortality) have been for his own assurance and consolation as much as for anyone else’s (παραμυθούμενος ἅμα μὲν ὑμᾶς, ἅμα δ’ ἑμαυτόν, 115d5–6). More dramatically and poignantly, Socrates’ famous last words—“Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius” (118a)—seem to be an indication that Socrates is *looking forward* to the post-mortem state of affairs as something good (and hence that death itself is something good for him). For Asclepius was the god of medicine and healing, to whom offerings were made by those seeking a cure for various maladies. If we assume—as I think we charitably must—that the last words of the *Phaedo* are not only consistent with the rest of the dialogue but are also a pithy recapitulation,¹⁸ then it is most plausible to think that Socrates feels a debt to Asclepius for (at this

¹⁷ White (1989: 273–274). White insightfully observes that the prefix *eu* (well, good) occurs multiple times in the final scene, with the result that it is “suffused with goodness”.

¹⁸ On this methodological point, see White (1989: 275–276). I am not concerned here with whether these were Socrates’ *actual* last words—a question that is unanswerable (since Plato is our only source of information on the matter). Either way—be they real or fictional—Plato is still making a choice to include these words as part of the final scene, and we can thus expect them to have an important connection to the rest of the *Phaedo*.

moment) “curing” him of embodiment and releasing his soul.¹⁹ Perhaps not coincidentally, the word that Plato uses for the hemlock mixture, φάρμακον (115a7, 115d3, 116c3, 117a6), can mean *both* ‘poison’ *and* ‘cure’, so there is an underlying ambiguity as to the very mechanism of Socrates’ death.²⁰

Of course the final scene of the *Phaedo* does not (and cannot) actually *prove* to us that Socrates’ post-mortem fate will be a good one; that is something which cannot be fully known, hence Socrates’ own references to “hope” (63c5, 67b8) and “belief” (114d5)—and not certainty—in the matter. There is, however, a second sense in which Socrates experiences a “good death”, and it is a kind of goodness which can be observed and which Plato goes to great lengths to put on display for us. To wit: a person’s death can be good in terms of *how* s/he dies, that is, in terms of one’s *attitude* and *mindset* both prior to death and during the process of dying. Clearly we would not say that someone whose final hours are filled with great pain or regret or anxiety or bitterness experienced a ‘good’ death. Socrates’ final hour, on the other hand, is presented to us as the very model of serenity: he is calm, restful, and without fear; he is cheerful and even laughs at one point (115c5); he shows no anger about his fate or bitterness toward the political

19 I thus align myself squarely with those commentators who take a non-literal (or allegorical) interpretation of Socrates’ final words (see, e. g. Damascius [in Westerink {1977: 284}], Rowe [1993: 295–296], Dorter [1982: 178], Burnet [1911: 118], Bluck [1955: 143], Ahrensford [1995: 198], Grube and Cooper [2002: 153n], Archer-Hind [1973: 146]). The alternative, literal interpretation maintains that Socrates is thanking Asclepius for curing him from some *actual* illness in the past (for this view see Gallop [1975: 225] and Hackforth [1955: 190n]). The problem with this latter interpretation is that none of its proponents are actually able to specify the particular event or illness which would have occasioned such a debt to Asclepius (Gallop himself says that it is in “some connection unknown”, and Hackforth asserts that “it is of course idle to speculate about the occasion for the vow”). Moreover, the literal interpretation is generally motivated by the belief that Socrates did not (and could not have) regarded life itself as a ‘sickness’ (as implied by the non-literal interpretation). Yet that motive is not compelling: though Socrates does not explicitly refer to life as a ‘sickness’, he does refer to the ‘chains’ or ‘bonds’ of incarnate life (67d), which clearly implies that ‘release’ or ‘deliverance’ (λύσει, 83b5) after death would be a *welcome* thing (for which one would rightly owe a debt or thanks); and he is emphatic throughout the dialogue that discarnate life is incomparably *better* than life as we know it now. (Gallop cites 90e as supposed evidence against that idea that Socrates regarded life as a sickness; but that passage says only that we must exert every effort to practice philosophy and cultivate virtue in this life, not that incarnate life is more valuable or fulfilling than discarnate life.)

20 Furthermore, there is the fact that the potion is a physical *mixture* of different elements (116d9, 117b8)—a bringing-together of the disparate that recalls earlier references to the simultaneity of pleasure and pain (60b–c) and the cycle of opposites (70cff.). Presumably the mixture in question is that between the actual hemlock—whose seeds were pounded in a mortar to extract the juice (Burnet 1911: 145, 149)—and some other liquid, likely water.

authorities, but instead shows kindness to both the officer of the Eleven (116b–d) and the individual who administers the hemlock (117a–b)²¹; and he hews to philosophical principle right up to the end, refusing Crito’s plea for a delay—since clinging to life in that way is unfitting (116e–117a)—and remaining mindful of the demands of piety (117b). When the time comes to take the hemlock, Socrates receives the cup “quite cheerfully” (μάλα ἴλεως, 117b3) and “without a tremor or any change of feature or color” (οὐδὲν τρέσας οὐδὲ διαφθείρας οὔτε τοῦ χρώματος οὔτε τοῦ προσώπου, 117b3–5), and proceeds to drink it “calmly and easily” (μάλα εὐχερῶς καὶ εὐκόλως ἐξέπιεν, 117c4–5).²² He then walks around for a bit, lies down when his legs feel heavy, and covers his head.²³

Socrates’ composure here is dramatically contrasted with the emotional state of his companions and friends. After Socrates drinks the hemlock, everyone in the room starts crying: Phaedo’s tears give way “in floods, against his will” (βίβη καὶ αὐτοῦ ἀστακτὶ ἐχώρει, 117c7), Crito is unable to restrain himself, and Apollodorus—who has been weeping for a while—becomes quite noisy and angry in his wailing (ἀναβρυχησάμενος κλάων καὶ ἀγανακτῶν, 117d4–5). Socrates is indignant at the excessive emotional display of his friends, regarding it as “unseemly” or a “false note” (πλημμελοῖεν, 117e1)—the sort of behavior that does not harmonize with the philosopher’s supposed self-mastery.²⁴ He prefers to die in a pious or good-omened *silence* (εὐφημίᾳ, 117e1). In this sense, if Socrates’ death is a kind of test of one’s

21 As Williamson (1904: 244) has pointed out, the officer of the Eleven and the person who administers the hemlock must be different individuals: the former is friendly toward Socrates and weeps for him, whereas the latter is matter-of-fact and treats Socrates no differently from any other criminal.

22 That Socrates shows no change in feature or color may suggest a kinship to the unchanging Forms (which are often described in these sorts of negative terms). The description of Socrates’ facial expression as ταυρηδόν or ‘like a bull’ (117b5) is less clear, and might be meant to indicate a sternness or fixity (though not necessarily fierceness; cf. Geddes [1885: 185–186]). (For other interpretations of ταυρηδόν, see Rowe [1993: 294] and Burnet [1911: 116–117]—who detect a note of mischief—and Burger [1984: 213]) That he drinks the potion so easily is all the more remarkable given that it supposedly has a rather foul smell (reported by Frohne and Pfänder [2005: 47] to be like mouse urine).

23 Why the covering of the head? We cannot know exactly; it could be due to shame, or alternatively a desire to spare his companions something unsightly (cf. Burger [1984: 215]). As a dramatic touch in the final scene, the act recalls Orphism, where head-covering was a part of the ritual (Stewart 1972).

24 The term πλημμελοῖεν nicely connects to the recurring theme of harmony in the *Phaedo*. There is also a gendered dimension here: it is assumed that men should be able to control their emotions, whereas it is expected that women are unable to do so. This is why Socrates had the women sent away for his final moments (117d–e). When his companions start crying, then, they are thus acting no better than Xanthippe, who was portrayed as crying at the beginning of the *Phaedo* (60a).

fortitude—pitting λόγος against πάθος—then his companions have conspicuously failed.²⁵ But Plato's approach here in the final scene is multi-layered, as this test is as much for *us* (the readers) as it is for Socrates' companions. I suspect that most of us felt at least some pangs of emotion when reading the end of the *Phaedo* for the first time, regardless of whether we share Socrates' philosophical commitments or even regard him as a noble figure. Moreover, Plato *knows* that his readers will likely react in this way, and is counting on that fact to make a broader point. In effect, Plato is enlisting us as part of the scene, engaging us in the pathos, and showing us—through the calm example of Socrates—what is *wrong* or *problematic* with our upwelling of emotion. Through this vicarious participation in the ending of the *Phaedo*—we readers are in the position of Phaedo, observers unable to fully control ourselves—we are made to *feel* our distance from Socrates and not just think about it abstractly.²⁶

The Good Life

Thus far I have argued that Plato uses the final scene of the *Phaedo* to show us what a “good death” involves. Specifically, Socrates' death is presented to us as good both in terms of his attitude *during* the event and in terms of the (hoped-for) state of affairs that will occur *after* the event. But the *Phaedo* is not merely a meditation on death; it is also—and perhaps more fundamentally—a meditation on how best to *live*. Indeed, the goodness of Socrates' death is but an extension of the goodness of the rest of his life, and his final moments simply magnify—in a most dramatic way—the sorts of commitments, value, and virtues that he possessed throughout his life. Thus when we inquire into the function and meaning of the final scene of the *Phaedo*, we ought not focus solely on the immediate action, but ought also to consider how that action points beyond itself to a broader conception of the “good life”.²⁷

²⁵ Cf. Burger (1984: 214) and White (1989: 282–283). It may be (as White suggests) that a person's death is the ultimate test of his/her goodness.

²⁶ Incidentally, in recounting Socrates' final moments in this way, Phaedo answers Echecrates' original question—for the latter had wanted to know both what Socrates *said* on his last day and *how Socrates died* (57a).

²⁷ Plato thinks that there ought to be continuity between one's character and conduct during life and one's stance toward death, even in the final moments—that a person's life, in other words, ought to be an integrated whole. In this respect we may contrast the character of Socrates with the title character of Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich*: the former dies just as he had lived, whereas the latter dies in a way that is discontinuous with most of his life. (Ilyich had mostly led a superficial and materialistic life, and only in his final days did he arrive at a

There are a number of ways in which Plato uses this scene to remind us of key claims from the rest of the dialogue, and to weave them together in a synoptic account of what the “good life” consists in:

1. *Soul (reason) as the true self.* The good life—which, it soon becomes apparent, is identical with the philosophical life—is predicated upon the right kind of knowledge. And one of the most fundamental things a person can know is what constitutes his true or essential self—namely, the soul, which in the *Phaedo* is more or less identified with reason.²⁸ Socrates adumbrates this view early on in the *Phaedo*, when he defines death as the *separation* of the body and soul (64c). In the discussion that follows, Socrates makes it clear that the soul is what is essential and most important about a human being, for it is only through reason that we are able to attain knowledge. Specifically, it is only through reason that we are able to attain knowledge of the Forms (65c), which is what philosophers desire most (66e)—and appropriately so, since the Forms are that to which we have a natural kinship (79d; 80a–b). By contrast, the body does not constitute our true self in any way: the bodily senses prevent us (while incarnate) from ever attaining an adequate grasp of the Forms (65a–e), and bodily desires and needs distract us from engaging in inquiry (66b–d). The body thus becomes something ‘alien’ or ‘other’ to the true self. This is why the philosopher will be welcoming of death—and will spend his life preparing for it—for it is only when soul is separated from the body that we can engage in “pure thought” (66a, 66e–67a), a state in which the soul “ceases to stray and remains in the same state as it is in touch with things of the same kind” (79d).

In the final scene Plato reminds us of these points one last time, and impresses their importance upon us. Crito asks Socrates, in a seemingly innocuous way, “How should we bury you?” (115c3). From Socrates’ point of view, however, this question betrays a fundamental misunderstanding:

I do not convince Crito that I am this Socrates talking to you here and ordering all I say, but he thinks that I am the thing which he will soon be looking at as a corpse, and so he asks how he shall bury me. I have been saying for some time and at some length that after

broader ethical awareness and sense of meaning.) For Plato—unlike for Tolstoy, perhaps—there can be no redemption in one’s final moments; the ending cannot salvage the whole or confer meaning upon an otherwise unremarkable whole.

²⁸ Obviously in other dialogues (like the *Republic* and *Phaedrus*) the soul is presented as having multiple parts, with reason as just one of them. But the *Phaedo* seems not to take that view, as becomes especially apparent in the Affinity Argument (where it is suggested that soul is non-composite, 80a–b).

I have drunk the poison I shall no longer be with you but will leave you to go and enjoy some good fortunes of the blessed, but it seems that I have said all this to him in vain in an attempt to reassure you and myself too. (115c–d)²⁹

When Crito had asked how we should bury *you*, he was assuming that Socrates' true self lay in his body. But as Socrates here points out, this is not the case: the *true* Socrates is the self-directed soul that is *talking* (διαλεγόμενος) and *ordering* (διατάττων), and that will soon be separated from the corpse.³⁰ It is not Socrates who will be buried or burned or carried or laid out, but his body (115e). We see, then, that there is still considerable distance between Socrates and Crito, the latter yet lacking a complete understanding of what the true self is.

That the body has an 'alien' nature is driven home even more vividly after Socrates drinks the hemlock. As I noted earlier, the one symptom of the poisoning that Plato notes is the *heaviness* and *numbness* that affects Socrates' body—a symptom that (aside from being physiologically real) emphasizes how much we are weighted *down* by our bodies (in contrast to the 'flight upwards' which the soul seeks). Not only that, but Socrates' numbness is said to begin in his *feet* and *legs*, the parts of the body that most directly connect us to the earth.³¹ Socrates has no control over the workings of the poison on his body; the hemlock acts blindly and mechanically, without the teleological perspective that is distinctive of souls, and that Socrates considers to be so fundamental to any proper understanding of the world (97c–99d).³² Once the poison begins to take effect, the administrator tests (ἐπεσκόπει, 117e7) its progress by pressing hard (σφόδρα πιέσας, e8) Socrates' feet and legs. Socrates indicates that he no longer feels or perceives (αἰσθάνοιτο, e8) anything in his extremities, though from the philosophical point of view this loss of sense-perception is ultimately a good thing (since the senses can never fully reveal truth to us). And thus Socrates' body becomes

²⁹ Translation by Grube and Cooper (2002). Unless otherwise noted, all other translations will be taken from this source.

³⁰ More precisely, we should say, Socrates' true self or soul is not that which *talks*—for talk occurs only in a bodily form (with a mouth, voicebox, etc.)—but which is the *source* and *director* of the talk (λόγοι).

³¹ The mention of the feet and legs (now at dusk) also reminds us of the opening scene (at daybreak), when Socrates' chains are removed (59e–60c). The chains were a source of discomfort, and their removal occasions an observation about the simultaneity of pleasure and pain. More directly, the chains limited Socrates' physical freedom, just as our embodiment limits the soul's free activity. (Cf. Burger [1984: 215] and Dorter [1982: 178].)

³² As Burger (1984: 213) points out, Socrates asks if there is anything he needs to *do* (τί χρὴ ποιεῖν, 117a8) after drinking the hemlock, and is told that the poison will *act of itself* (αὐτὸ ποιήσει, b1–2).

explicitly what it always was implicitly—an object, a thing, an ‘other’ that we can never fully master (but which is ever trying to master us, i. e. our soul).

2. *Caring for the self (soul)*. For Socrates, it is not sufficient simply to *know* what the true self is; one must also *act* upon that knowledge. And one form of action that is particularly valorized in the *Phaedo* is that of *caring* for the self. According to Socrates, it is a moral imperative and a matter of self-interest show care (ἐπιμελείας, 107c2) for one’s soul, and one is in great danger (κίνδυνος, c4) by failing to do so. This is especially the case if (as Socrates has been arguing) the soul is immortal—for then the soul is ours for *all time* (c3–4), and death will offer no sanctuary from an avoidance of self-care. Much of the *Phaedo* is concerned with laying out what such ‘care’ involves. Several elements are seen as critical: (a) given the problematic nature of the body, we should be unconcerned (to the extent possible) with the physical pleasures of food, drink, sex, clothing, and the like (64d–65a; 81b–c; 84a–b), for such things serve only as “another nail to rivet the soul to the body,” making us think (falsely) that “truth is what the body says it is” (83d)³³; (b) we should attempt (as much as possible) to *separate* (χωρίζειν) our soul from the body and use “pure thought alone” as a means of engaging in philosophical inquiry (65e–66a; 67c), the goal being to have the soul “gather itself and collect itself out of every part of the body and to dwell by itself as far as it can” (67c–d; 83a–b); (c) we should *withdraw from the senses* to the extent possible, given that the senses are not a reliable source of truth (83a; 65b–e), and instead rely on *recollection* (ἀνάμνησις) as the method of grasping the Forms (where that recollection is triggered by ordinary objects that resemble the Forms; 74a–d); and (d) we should cultivate and pursue moral *virtue*, exemplifying such qualities as moderation, courage, justice, and wisdom (68c–69b).

Again in the final scene Plato puts this concept of self-care into the foreground. Crito wants to know whether Socrates has any particular instructions for his friends in regard to his children—“What can we do that would please you most (ἐν χάριτι μάλιστα)?” (115b). Crito perhaps has in mind here a straightforward kind of ‘care’, such as providing for the financial or physical well-being of Socrates’ children. But Socrates makes it clear that another, broader kind of care is what is needed:

Nothing new, Crito ... but what I am always saying, that you will please me and mine and yourselves by taking good care of your own selves in whatever you do, even if you do not

³³ Socrates goes so far as to say that the philosopher will *disdain* or *despise* (ἀτιμάζει, 65d1) the body.

agree with me now, but if you neglect your own selves, and are unwilling to live following the tracks, as it were, of what we have said now and on previous occasions, you will achieve nothing even if you strongly agree with me at this moment. (115b)

The care mentioned here is *nothing new*—it is, in fact, precisely what Socrates has been discussing throughout the *Phaedo*. And, as we have already seen, Socrates himself models this kind of self-care in the final scene: he shows a complete disregard for eating or drinking or sex³⁴; his stoic demeanor and detached handling of the poison-cup suggest a separation from ordinary bodily demands; and he uses reason rather than the senses to determine what is best and what is true (a fact dramatically represented by the ultimate departure of his sense faculties). Socrates also emphasizes here that one must *live* in accordance with the right λόγοι, *even if you agree with him at this moment*. So a merely verbal or intellectual understanding is not enough; arguments that lead to consensus but no correlative action are of no benefit to an individual's soul. To practice self-care in this way is what will ultimately be most pleasing to Socrates, as well as to oneself.³⁵

3. *The purification of the soul.* The process described above—caring for the soul by cultivating reason, distancing oneself from bodily concerns, and so on—is most frequently referred to by Socrates as a process of *purification* (κάθαρσις, 67c5; 67a5; 69c1, c6; 80e2; 82d6; 83d9). This term, taken by Plato from an Orphic context,³⁶ indicates that the highest aim of a human life is that of 'cleansing' the soul of the earthly elements that prevent us from attaining what we most desire (knowledge of the Forms). Socrates also refers to the *practice* (ἐπιτηδεύουσιν) involved in the philosophical life, as well as the *preparation* (παρεσκευάσθαι, 67c2) and *training* (μελετώσι, 67e5, 81a1) which we are supposed to be undergoing. These terms indicate that a human life is—or ought to be, from the philosophical perspective—*forward-looking* and not just reactive to present or past circumstances; that part of

34 At 116e Crito tries to entice Socrates into holding out a little longer before taking the hemlock, noting that other prisoners do so in order to eat, drink, and have sex right before death. But Socrates sees no benefit to such last-minute indulgence.

35 That the philosophical and virtuous life is ultimately the most fulfilling life is a common theme of the dialogues, the *Phaedo* included. In saying that *he* (Socrates) will be most pleased if his companions pursue self-care, Socrates seems to be suggesting that the practice of philosophy is the ultimate form of *friendship* (Ahrensdorf [1995: 194]).

36 For a good discussion of the Orphic motifs appropriated by Plato in the *Phaedo* (and the final scene in particular), see Stewart (1972). Prominent Orphic rituals included ritual cleansing, various kinds of abstentions (such as meat-eating), the use of sacred books, the chanting of spells, the recitation of a cosmogony, covering the head, offering prayers for the dead, and the sue of cellars and caves. As Stewart demonstrates, all of these rituals have some kind of analogue in the *Phaedo*.

the purpose of life is to enable us to get as close as possible to knowledge of the Forms while we are incarnate—a closeness which will, in turn, make us ready for a purer knowledge after death.

The theme of purification is vividly brought out in the final scene when Socrates takes his bath (116a). The moment is a rather unique one, since Socrates bathed infrequently during his life, and yet is doing so now right before his death.³⁷ Apart from the literal cleansing of his body, the bath is clearly symbolic of the ultimate cleansing of the soul from the body that Socrates is about to undergo.³⁸ In terms of the drama of the final scene, the moment of Socrates' bath marks a rupture: prior to the bath, the emphasis is on the abstract (the nature of the self and the need for self-care); after the bath, the emphasis is on the concrete and particular (the drinking of the hemlock). During the bath itself, Socrates leaves his companions to go to another room—for quite a long time (χρόνον πολὺν, 116b6), we are told—whereupon Phaedo re-enters the narrative in the first-person to recount the goings-on. Initially, while the bath proper is taking place, Socrates is alone with Crito; he wants to take care of it himself, and spare the women the trouble (πράγματα) of having to wash his corpse (115a7–8).³⁹ Afterwards, Socrates' children and “the women of his household” (οἰκεῖαι γυναῖκες, 116b2) enter the bathroom, and they spend a good deal of time together separate from Socrates' male companions.⁴⁰ This dramatic framing all serves to remind us of the importance of purification, and to demonstrate it to us (symbolically).

37 The point is made rather humorously in the beginning of the *Symposium*, where Socrates has just bathed and put on his “fancy sandals,” both of which (according to Aristodemus) were “very unusual events” (174a). As Rowe (1993: 290) points out, there is some parallel here to the ritual cleansing of heroes (Socrates being constructed in the *Phaedo* as a new kind of hero).

38 Cf. Gill (1973: 27). As has been noted (Dorter [1982: 177], Stewart 1972), a water-motif has recurred throughout the *Phaedo*: the rivers described in the eschatological myth (109bff); the voyages of Theseus (58a) and Heracles (89c); the raft of Simmias (85d); Socrates' second sailing (99d); and the swans (84e–85b).

39 Why the exclusion of women at this point? Burger (1984: 206) suggests that Socrates feels shame at becoming a mere thing or πράγμα. That may be, but I think that this detail is also meant to echo the exclusion of women in Orphic ritual (cf. Stewart [1972: 257–8]). In this respect—and despite his instructions to Crito to bury his body in whatever way Crito thinks most customary (νόμιμον, 116a1)—Socrates is doing something unusual, since it was customary for bodies to be washed after death (White [1989: 301]).

40 There is thus a reversal—first the women are excluded, and then the adult men (save Crito) are excluded. (Crito likely remained in the room since he was Socrates' executor, and thus needed to be present to record his final instructions to his family [Rowe {1993: 292}].) It seems likely that Xanthippe would have been included among the “women”, though she is not specifically named. Burger (1984: 210) suggests that Socrates may have been alone for part of the time, though there is no evidence one way or the other on that question.

4. *Moderation, courage, justice.* Socrates insists early in the *Phaedo* that the philosopher who pursues a course of self-care and purification will exemplify the cardinal virtues of moderation, courage, and justice. The philosopher has true courage (ἀνδρεία) because he does not fear death, recognizing it to be a blessing (68b–c); by contrast, men who face death merely out of fear of greater evils are not genuinely courageous (since one cannot be courageous through fear, 68d). Likewise, the philosopher has true moderation (σωφροσύνη) because he is not carried away by his desires or passions (ἐπιθυμία) or pleasures, but keeps them in an orderly (κοσμίως) state (68c–d); by contrast, men who refrain from one given pleasure for fear of being deprived of *other* pleasures are not genuinely temperate (since they are still mastered by pleasure, 68e–69a). Socrates also adds that the philosopher will be just (69b3), though he does not give a parallel account as to why this is so.⁴¹

We have seen already a number of ways in which Socrates exemplifies these three virtues in the final scene. His courage is obvious—a calm demeanor in the face of death—and hardly needs further comment beyond what I have already said. His moderation is evident as well, for instance in his refusal of Crito's offer to delay the drinking of the hemlock so as to enjoy food, drink, and sex (116e); and in his stoic attitude in the midst of the crying and wailing of his friends (117c–e). Finally, we have indications of his justice, such as in the fact that he acts with kindness and gentleness—and not anger—toward the officer of the Eleven (116b–d). It is most fitting, then, that the last words of the *Phaedo*—as spoken by the title character⁴²—are the following: “Such was the end of our comrade ... a man who ... was, of all those we have known, the best and the wisest and the most just” (118a).⁴³ That the very last word of the dialogue is δικαιοτάτου (most just) is, on one level, a testament to the moral qualities of a friend now died; but it is also, in a more political (and darker) vein, an implicit rebuke of the entire process that led to Socrates being executed in the first place. The so-called ‘jurors’ (δικασταί)—those whose ostensible role it is to decide matters of justice—determined that Socrates was guilty; with this last word, then, Plato is offering his own rejoinder, reminding us that the true arbiters of justice were not to be found in the courtroom on that day.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Cf. also 69c2 and 82a3, b2, where it is similarly implied that philosophers will be just.

⁴² There is therefore an important distinction to be made between Socrates' last words (owing the cock to Asclepius) and Phaedo's last words. It is the latter that constitute the end of the dialogue.

⁴³ As White (1989: 284) points out, this does not mean that Phaedo considered Socrates to be the best of all men, but rather the best of all men he has known.

⁴⁴ Cf. Burger (1984: 217), who calls these last words a kind of exoneration of Socrates (though the same could be said of the entirety of the *Phaedo*). One is reminded here of *Apology* 41a,

5. *Piety*. Another part of the “good life” (as conceived of by Plato) is having an appropriate attitude and relation toward the divine. Ultimately, of course, it is the Forms that are the most important divine object, as that which the philosophers most desire to know (66d–e); the human soul has a certain kinship to the divine Forms—they are of the same kind (79d)—and as such the philosopher welcomes death. But beyond the Forms, Socrates also refers to various (unnamed) “gods” during the *Phaedo*, and shows an appropriately respectful and pious attitude toward them.⁴⁵ We see this right at the outset of the dialogue: Socrates reports a dream that he just had, in which an unknown (but presumably divine) voice bids him to “practice and cultivate the arts” (60d–e). Though initially interpreting this as an injunction to practice philosophy, Socrates later interprets it more literally—as an injunction to practice the “popular art” of poetry—and accordingly composes various poems *in honor of the god* (61a–b). Elsewhere Socrates refers to the gods as our “guardians” (62b) and “good masters” (63c). Aside from the fact that piety is one of the traditional moral virtues, it is a quality worth cultivating purely for prudential reasons. For, as Socrates repeatedly says, he himself expects to join the gods after death (63c); in fact, *only* philosophers—those who have sufficiently “purified” themselves—will join the company of the gods after death (82b–c; 114c), whereas impure souls fail to do so (83e; 113d–114b). Piety is thus the only path toward liberation (114c).

In the final scene Socrates displays piety in at least three ways. First, when he is given the hemlock mixture, he asks if it is permissible to pour a libation (117b). Although the administrator refuses Socrates’ request—since the quantity of the liquid was tailored to what would be sufficient to end Socrates’ life—it is nonetheless an attempt to appropriate an agent of death for use as an agent of

where Socrates says that he looks forward to an afterlife where he can interact with the *true* judges or jurymen (τοὺς ὡς ἀληθῶς δικαστάς). At the beginning of the *Phaedo*, Socrates offers his defense before his friends as his “judges” (δικασταίς, 63e8). Although his friends in the *Phaedo* might not be the ‘true’ judges alluded to in *Apology*—nor are they the “good masters” (δεσπότης πάνυ ἀγαθούς, 63c2–3), i. e. the gods whom he expects to join after death—they are nonetheless quite superior to the randomly selected jurymen from Socrates’ trial.

⁴⁵ The exact nature of Plato’s view of the gods (not to mention the historical Socrates’ view of the gods) remains an open question, which I will not attempt to address here. Plato clearly does not conceive of the gods in the traditional (mythologically-based) terms, as anthropomorphism is rejected in a number of places (e. g. *Republic II*; *Phaedrus* 246c–d). The *Timaeus* has a place for the gods, though they are identified with the planets and stars.

transaction with the gods.⁴⁶ (It is also another appropriation of an Orphic motif.⁴⁷) Second, Socrates offers a prayer to the gods—viz., that his journey from here to the otherworld may be fortunate (117c). Third, as already noted, Socrates directs Crito to make an offering (of a cock) to the god Asclepius (118a). More precisely, Socrates says “we owe a cock to Asclepius”—implying that it is not Socrates’ obligation alone, and that the demands of piety hardly cease with his death. Right until the end, then, Socrates cultivates a pious attitude and disposition.

6. *Discourse, argument, λόγος*. Philosophy is fundamentally a discursive enterprise, and so it is not surprising that in the *Phaedo* the λόγος—the word, the argument, the speech, the language—is seen as central to the possibility of leading a good life. The philosopher will both *use* λόγοι in the right way, and also have the right *relationship with* (or *attitude toward*) λόγοι—which amounts to a certain *devotion* to λόγοι. Here again, Socrates exemplifies this attitude early and consistently in the *Phaedo*. At the beginning of the dialogue he is warned (by the prison official) to talk (διαλέγεσθαι) as little as possible, since those who engage in talk tend to get “heated” (θερμαίνεσθαι) and as a result often require extra dosages of hemlock (63d–e). But Socrates is undeterred—he is prepared to take the potion twice or three times, if necessary—and proceeds to offer his *defense* or *argument* (τὸν λόγον ἀποδοῦναι) as if before his judges, viz., his argument as to why philosophers should be of good cheer in the face of death (63e). As Socrates says later, he takes refuge in words (χρῆναι εἰς τοὺς λόγους καταφυγόντα) and investigates the truth of things by means of them (ἐν ἐκείνοις σκοπεῖν τῶν ὄντων τὴν ἀλήθειαν, 99e5–6).

This devotion to the λόγος emerges again at the mid-point of the *Phaedo*, after Socrates has presented his initial three arguments for immortality (cycle of

⁴⁶ It is unclear to whom Socrates would have made the libation, though it is most assuredly some god(s) that he had in mind. Burnet (1911: 146) thinks that Anytus was the intended recipient, though that cannot be the case, for (as White [1989: 274] notes) Socrates’ subsequent prayer—which is offered to the *gods*—is intended as a *substitute* for the libation (and hence the latter could not have been intended for a human). Several commentators have suggested—without evidence—that this moment is something other than an expression of piety. (E. g. Bluck [1955: 138] sees the libation as mere “humour”, while Burger [1984: 213] sees it as an “accusation against the gods.”) Burger does rightly note (214) a certain irony in the situation: if Socrates had remained silent all day—instead of engaging in conversation—then he might not have needed to consume the entire hemlock mixture, and thus might have had some left over for a libation. (Socrates is warned not to talk too much on his last day; he is told at 63d–e that those who are “heated” when they talk and take the poison must sometimes consume additional quantities in order for it to take effect.)

⁴⁷ Stewart (1972: 258).

opposites, recollection, affinity). Simmias and Cebes have some reservations about those arguments, but are hesitant to present their objections—they do not want to disturb Socrates in his present situation. (We notice at this point that there is a long *silence* [σιγή, 84c1].) But Socrates is again undeterred:

Come ... do you think there is something lacking in my argument? There are still many doubtful points and many objections for anyone who wants a thorough discussion of these matters. If you are discussing some other subject, I have nothing to say, but if you have some difficulty about this one, do not hesitate to speak for yourselves and expound it if you think the argument could be improved, and if you think you will do better, take me along with you in the discussion. (84c)

The contingent factors of the moment are irrelevant to Socrates; what matters most to him is that we follow the argument through. And this is to be a *collective* undertaking—indeed, necessarily so, since the back-and-forth of discussion is essential for uncovering flaws and problems (and reinforcing truths) in one’s own reasoning. Simmias seems to appreciate fully the Socratic spirit here. For his part, Simmias thinks that our obligation as philosophers is *either* to discover or learn the truth for ourselves (μαθεῖν ὅπῃ ἔχει ἢ εὐρεῖν), *or* use the “best and most irrefutable” account (τὸν γοῦν βέλτιστον τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων λόγων λαβόντα καὶ δυσεξελεγκτότατον) as a kind of “raft” or provisional hypothesis (85c–d). Socrates himself adopts this “raft” method later in the dialogue, in the so-called “final argument” (100a–b).

But there is a danger in Socrates’ oft-repeated invitation for criticisms: a casual observer, noticing that every proposition or claim has a seemingly equal counter-claim, might be led to think that there simply is no truth to be gained through this process. This stance amounts to skepticism and misology—the view that “there is no soundness or reliability in any object or in any argument, but that all that exists simply fluctuates up and down as if it were in the Euripus and does not remain in the same place for any time at all” (90c). Socrates is quite cognizant of the danger (and ubiquity) of misology, which is why he addresses it head-on at the dramatic mid-point of the *Phaedo* (89d–91c, the very point at which Simmias’ and Cebes’ objections seem to threaten the entire viability of the inquiry). Socrates believes that it is better (and more virtuous) to operate under the assumption that there *does* in fact exist a “true and reliable argument” (τινος ἀληθοῦς καὶ βεβαίου λόγου), and to blame *oneself* for dialectical failure rather than to blame the λόγοι (90c–d).⁴⁸ Exceptional λόγοι—like exceptionally tall or short people—are in short supply, so one should not expect to encounter them

⁴⁸ Notice that Socrates does *not* say here that there always (or ever) *exists* a true and reliable argument; rather, that it is a pity to adopt misology *if it should turn out* that a true and reliable

readily (if ever). The takeaway then is that it is *we* who should strive to become better—more devoted to the λόγος and more “sound” (ὕγιως ἔχειν, 90e3)—though the process of doing so requires a certain skill (90d) as well as courage and eagerness (90e).

In the final scene of the *Phaedo* it is reaffirmed that the proper method of philosophy is a discursive one—specifically, that the method involves dialogue and a questioning and examining of what has been said (διαλεγόμενοι περὶ τῶν εἰρημένων καὶ ἀνασκοποῦντες, 116a4–5). I have already noted one way in which Socrates displays devotion to the λόγος in the final scene, insofar as he hews to his lifelong beliefs and principles as regards the nature of the true self and the importance of self-care (114d–115e). He does not, in other words, allow present circumstances to change his mind about what the best argument appears to dictate. One interesting point that emerges in this passage is the fact that soul (the true self) is that which is the *source* or *origin* of λόγοι; it is Socrates, his true self—and not his body—that talks and orders all that he says (διαλεγόμενος καὶ διατάττων ἕκαστον τῶν λεγομένων, 115c7–8).⁴⁹

Another point emerges here as well: the need for us to take great care in selecting our λόγοι, and to make them as *precise* and *fitting* as possible. When Crito asks Socrates “How shall we bury you?” (115c), he is (as I noted earlier) making a mistake, since the “you” in question here—Socrates’ soul—is not the sort of thing that can or will be buried. And, as Socrates quickly points out, this mistake is not merely a verbal one: “to express oneself badly [τὸ μὴ καλῶς λέγειν] is not only faulty [πλημμελής] as far as the language goes, but does some harm to the soul” (115e4–6). The words that one uses are both a *reflection* (or image) of one’s thoughts as well as a way of *shaping* those thoughts. Thus, if we regularly engage in talk that is ‘out of tune’—the literal meaning of πλημμελής—then so too will our souls become out of tune. That, in turn, is both an intellectual vice (thinking in imprecise or false ways) and a moral vice (developing habits or dispositions on the basis of false beliefs).⁵⁰ So it turns out that the correct use of λόγοι—combined with an overarching devotion to them—is an

argument exists (εἰ ὄντος ..., 90c8–9). I will say more about this kind of modesty and provisionality in a moment.

49 Ironically, though, soul itself—as an invisible and intangible entity—cannot be (fully) represented in those λόγοι.

50 For instance, if one continually speaks (as Crito does in this passage) of the body as the true self, then one will come to *think* in those terms as well—and eventually *act* on that basis (Williamson [1904: 242–243]). Or as Damascius (in Westerink [1977: 282]), puts the point, faulty speech corresponds to an activity of the soul, and thus might develop into a lasting disposition. (Cf. also Rowe [1993: 292] and Archer-Hind [1973: 141–142].)

essential part of the process of purification, and that philosophical dialogue has a healing or curative power.⁵¹

Even when it comes to λόγοι, however, there is a time for moderation and abstention. At the mid-point of the *Phaedo*—after Socrates' initial three arguments for immortality—there is a long *silence*, as Socrates concentrates on what was said thus far (πρὸς τῷ εἰρημῆνῳ λόγῳ ἦν, 84c1–3). Likewise at 95e7, Socrates is silent for quite a while as he reflects on Cebes' objection to immortality. So clearly talk is not *always* called for among philosophers, and can be downright detrimental to one's own ability to understand and to 'own' the λόγοι. So too, at the very end of the dialogue, Socrates—in the face of his companions' loud wailing—demands a good-omened silence (εὐφημία, 117e1) as the appropriate setting in which to die.⁵² Thus, what is true of good rhetoric (*Phaedrus* 272a) is true also of good philosophy: it is essential to know when to speak and to know when to hold back from speaking.

7. *Provisionality, modesty.* Finally, it is characteristic of the good philosopher—one who *loves* wisdom and does not (yet) possess it—that s/he recognizes the *limits* of philosophical inquiry and human cognition. This is in fact a direct consequence of what Socrates has said about the Forms: if full knowledge of the Forms can be attained only *after* death, then no *living* (that is, incarnate) human can possibly claim to possess such knowledge. The philosopher will thus maintain an attitude of *modesty*, and will not make false claims to the possession of complete truth. Dialectically, this manifests itself in a concern with truth rather than eristic—a desire to *know* rather than a desire to *win* an argument (91a). In terms of the drama of the *Phaedo*, this attitude is clear in Socrates' welcoming of criticisms and objections (85b, e; 86d–e). Moreover, Socrates explicitly acknowledges that his arguments in the *Phaedo* are not the final word, and are in need of re-examination (and perhaps rejection) (107b).

51 This point may be alluded to in Socrates' own last words, that “we owe a cock to Asclepius”. If “we” owe a debt to Asclepius, then that implies that it is not just Socrates who has been healed. Perhaps Socrates means simply that Crito too will *eventually* die, and will *at that point* be healed (thus making the cock a kind of proactive offering). But (as Crooks [2000: 172] suggests) he may also mean that Crito has *already* experienced some healing, namely, the sort of healing effected in life by way of philosophy—specifically, by way of shared inquiry and the λόγος. (White's suggestion [1989: 278]—that the “we” is accounted for by the fact that Crito was wealthy and thus able to take care of any of Socrates' outstanding debts—is of course possible, but seems to undervalue the significance of Socrates' last words.)

52 As Rowe (1993: 294–295) points out, this request is unusual, since Greek burials were normally accompanied by loud lamentations, silence being reserved for an approach to the gods. But since—in Socrates' view—his death entails an impending approach to the gods, the request makes sense.

In the final scene this notion of provisionality is both discussed and dramatized. After finishing his recounting of the eschatological myth, Socrates says the following:

No sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief—for the risk is a noble one—that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places, since the soul is evidently immortal, and a man should repeat this to himself as if it were an incantation, which is why I have been prolonging my tale. (114d)

Socrates will not insist (δυσχυρίσασθαι, d1) that his mythological account is the complete truth—indeed he could not possibly do so, given that its subject-matter (details of what happens to the soul after death) lies beyond the reach of any mortal human. Instead, *belief* (οἰόμενῳ) about such matters—that this or *something like* this is true (d2–3)—is warranted on purely moral and prudential grounds, insofar as living in accordance with such a belief will make one a better person and better positioned to depart life in a purified state (114e–115a).⁵³ (That such belief is to be repeated to oneself as a kind of incantation [ἐπάδειν, d7] also indicates that it is to have a soothing and curative effect.⁵⁴)

There is a dramatic depiction of these ideas as well. When Socrates leaves the main jail cell to take his bath and talk to his family—something that, we recall, took quite some time (possibly several hours)—there is a narrative break in the *Phaedo*. Phaedo (the narrator) re-inserts himself in the first person, and describes what happened next: “We stayed, talking [διαλεγόμενοι] among ourselves, questioning [ἀνασκοποῦντες] what had been said, and then again talking [διεξιόντες] of the great misfortune that had befallen us” (116a4–6). Thus, even (or perhaps especially) in Socrates’ absence, *the conversation and dialogue continue*. The arguments thus far presented in the *Phaedo* are not the ‘last word’ for Phaedo and his friends, and neither should they be for us (the readers). The truth remains elusive, but we shall all be better people by continuing on in the search for it.⁵⁵

53 Socrates says that it is “fitting” (πρέπειν, d5) for a man to “risk” (κινδυνεύσαι, d5) such belief, and that such risk is a “noble” (καλός, d6) one. Rowe (1993: 289) claims that (according to Socrates) what is ‘fitting’ here is that we *insist* on the truth of the myth. But that cannot be right, since Socrates has just said that *no sensible man* (νοῦν ἔχοντι ἄνθρωποι) would insist on such things. As I read it, then, what is ‘fitting’ is that we hold a certain belief—much in the manner of Simmias’ raft—without pretending to know its complete veracity.

54 On the need for charms also cf. 77e–78a.

55 There may also be one specific question on which the final scene is meant to provoke our reflection: what, precisely, was the *cause* of Socrates’ death? Was it the poison? The jurors? Socrates’ refusal to escape? (Cf. Burger [1984: 217].) Each of these answers represents a different *kind* of cause or explanation of the event. It would certainly be fitting for us (the readers) to

The Significance of the Final Scene

If what I have said above is correct, Plato is using the final scene of the *Phaedo* to show some of the core elements of the good life (that is, the philosophical life). In sum, the philosopher will recognize the soul as the true self, and care for that soul appropriately, by distancing him- or herself (as much as possible) from bodily concerns and cultivating reason (a process which Socrates calls “purification”); s/he will strive to embody the cardinal virtues of moderation, temperance, justice, and piety; s/he will be devoted to the λόγος, pursuing argument and dialogue in as precise a way as possible; but s/he will also be mindful of the fact that complete knowledge or finality is impossible for incarnate humans, and that a fuller understanding is always possible. Living in accordance with these principles is but the flip side of what I earlier called the “good death”. For, on the one hand, the person who lives well (in the Socratic sense) will likely secure for themselves a blessed afterlife, and so their death will be good in terms of what it leads to. On the other hand, someone whose life embodies purification, virtue, and reason will have such qualities right up to the moment of death, and will not be disturbed by the end—thus making death “good” in terms of one’s attitude during the dying process.

I conclude, then, that the final scene of the *Phaedo* has at least a twofold significance and function. The first is intratextual, that is, a function in terms of the *Phaedo* as a coherent and integrated dialogue. The various elements of the good death and the good life that I have identified in the final scene are all echoes of statements and claims made earlier in the dialogue. In this way, the final scene serves as a pithy and dramatic recapitulation of rest of the *Phaedo*. This serves of course to *remind* us of what was said earlier, but it also helps us to better *understand* what was said earlier, as we see various ideas in a new—and especially dramatic—context. Those ideas are put on display for us, and are not merely discussed. This in turn helps the *Phaedo* to achieve an overall narrative and structural unity, as the various elements of the dialogue are brought together in the conclusion.

The second function of the final scene is extratextual, that is, a function that relates the text to us as readers. Like many myths and stories, the *Phaedo* is designed in part as an exhortatory tale, and is supposed to have a moral and philosophical significance for us as readers. Plato wants us to reflect on our *own*

reflect on this question, not merely as historical trivia or for the sake of logic-chopping, but because causal inquiry is central to philosophical inquiry and to the *Phaedo* itself. Cf. esp. Socrates’ lengthy discussion of causality at 96a–101e, wherein he offers an implicit taxonomy of different kinds of causes and explanations (material vs. moving vs. teleological).

lives, and to be moved to implement many of the core ideas of the *Phaedo* in our lives. Reflecting on and re-examining arguments is one way for us to be so moved. But Plato also wishes to *engage us as part of the drama* in the *Phaedo*, something that is especially the case in the final scene. In one sense we are in the position of Echebrates, as listeners to a narration told by another. But in another sense Plato wants us to be in the position of Phaedo, imaginatively and vicariously participating in the drama itself. If we can see ourselves as part of the scene, then we can potentially be moved by it in an especially powerful way. In particular, as we witness the exemplar of an equanimous and calm Socrates, we might come to feel our distance from him, in terms of how much more work we need to do to reach such an ideal of the good life. (Is it not more natural to identify with the tears and cries of Socrates' friends and family than with the tearlessness of Socrates?) This in turn serves as a provocation to us to engage (or re-engage) our own process of purification and self-care.

Many readers of the *Phaedo* (myself included) feel somewhat uncomfortable or ambivalent about the image of Socrates being presented here. Even granting that it is an *image*—a character constructed for a particular text—it might be thought that there is something unsavory about this image serving as a normative ideal. With his emotionless reaction to his own death and his seeming indifference to the sadness (and future well-being) of his friends and family, is not the Socrates of the *Phaedo* something of an *inhuman* figure?⁵⁶ One way of responding to this worry is to deny its premise—to deny, that is, that Socrates is actually presented to us as 'inhuman'. For if we look closely at the text (it is claimed), we might see that Socrates is not nearly as detached or uncaring as one might think.⁵⁷ I think, however, that the discomfort underlying this objection is perfectly natural, and need not be explained away or countered by interpretive strategies; in fact, I think that it is something that Plato *intends* for

56 This critique was most famously lodged by Nietzsche, who saw Socrates as turning away from life and being hostile toward life; see "The Problem of Socrates" in *Twilight of the Idols*. Among contemporary commentators, see Ahrens Dorf (1995: 194), who thinks that Socrates "shows no concern whatsoever for the future lives of his sons"; and Eckstein (1981: 198–199), who calls Socrates "callous" for not giving any special instructions for his children, and adds that "he died owing much more to himself and those who loved him—love and deeper understanding."

57 For instance, from the fact that Socrates was alone with his family for quite some time after the bath—perhaps for several hours—Burnet (1911: 144) concludes that he was not at all indifferent to them. Likewise, the fact that Socrates' *very young children* is noted at the beginning and end of the *Phaedo* (60a, 116b) has been taken as evidence that this 70-year-old, supposedly 'other-worldly' philosopher has an ongoing interest in the erotic, despite what he says at 64d (White [1989: 272]).

us to experience. Plato *wants* us to be unsettled by the image of a dying Socrates, not just because of the tragedy involved—the conviction of a just man by an unjust political system and citizenry—but because of how far we (as readers and listeners) *fall short* of his character. This then makes the final scene (along with the rest of the *Phaedo*) into a kind of challenge to the reader, meant to provoke us to engage in self-care and self-purification. And on the specific point, Plato might say, Socrates here is not an *inhuman* figure, but a human who has come as close as he can to fulfilling his nature, in particular the divine (rational) portion of his nature. The fact that most people are disturbed by this image or find it unappealing does not by itself constitute an argument against its value.

The End(s) of Philosophy

I want to conclude with a brief reflection on a broader, metaphilosophical question. In this article I have considered the meaning and function of the final scene in the *Phaedo*. This scene is an ending in two ways, first as a depiction of the end of one man's life, and second as the ending of a written (and narrated) text. But what about philosophy itself? Is there any sense in which philosophy (as Plato conceives of it) has an end, such that we could conceivably write the 'story of philosophy'?⁵⁸

On the one hand, the *Phaedo* seems to make clear that philosophy does not have an end. As I argued earlier, a central part of the philosophical life is the pursuit of purification through the appropriate self-care, self-knowledge, and inquiry into the Forms (via arguments, λόγοι, and dialogue). It is no coincidence that Plato also uses the terms *practice* (ἐπιτηδεύουσιν), *preparation* (παρεσκευάσθαι, 67c2), and *training* (μελετώσι, 67e5, 81a1) to characterize the philosophical life—terms which all suggest that the process is meant to be an *ongoing* and one. An athlete's training, for instance, is never really 'complete', since there is always *something* that s/he could do to become better.⁵⁹ So too with philosophers: there is always more to be

58 The word 'end' (as in the Greek τέλος) can be ambiguous between (a) the final or terminal point of some X (action, story, event, etc.); and (b) the ultimate goal or purpose of X or toward which X is directed. In posing the above question I mainly have (a) in mind, though as we will see in a moment the two senses are closely connected for Plato. Claims regarding "the end of philosophy" have become commonplace in the postmodern era, though it is not something that seems to have particularly concerned the ancients.

59 There may be a limit, in practical terms, as to how far any given person's athletic ability can be cultivated (at least without the use of drugs or bodily enhancements). But a person's soul is,

known, cognized, understood, and developed.⁶⁰ The epistemic reason for this is, quite simply, that the Forms are such as cannot be grasped by the body or the senses—and, hence, that we can only ever get true knowledge of them after death. While incarnate, the best we can do is to gain partial and mediated knowledge of the Forms (via recollection), getting closer to the goal but never really arriving. We have seen that Plato indicates the provisionality of philosophy both in word (in Socrates' statement that his arguments require re-examination, 107b) and in deed (in the fact that Socrates' companion continue the conversation in his absence, 116a). We readers are meant to carry on the (unending) inquiry which has begun in the *Phaedo*. In this sense, even though the *Phaedo* as a text comes to an end, its questions and arguments do not; and just as the final scene depicts not only Socrates' death but his whole life, so too does the final scene reflect the whole *Phaedo* in its finitude and incompleteness.

On the other hand, there is also a sense in which philosophy *could* have an end or *come to an end*; such an outcome is at least *possible* or *conceivable*, however unlikely. Granted that, so long as philosophers exist, their pursuits will be ongoing and never complete (and thus endless). But must it be the case that philosophers always exist? The *Phaedo* would seem to open the possibility to a negative answer. We must remember here that what Plato calls 'philosophy' is inherently an *incarnate* pursuit, that is, something undertaken by embodied creatures. Philosophers are those who *love* wisdom but do not possess it.⁶¹ (By contrast, the gods are not philosophers and are never referred to as such.) As the *Phaedo* makes clear, however, it is possible for an incarnate human to free him- or herself entirely from the cycle of reincarnation, joining the gods after death and never returning to a body.⁶² In theory, then, if *all* humans were eventually (and successively) to lead an appropriately virtuous and pure life, then all would eventually be freed from embodiment. In such a scenario, philosophy would cease to exist, as wisdom-obtaining discarnate souls would take the place of wisdom-loving incarnate souls.⁶³ This is a most unlikely scenario—not least because of Plato's oft-expressed pessimism about the seeming unavoidability of non-philosophical soul-types—but it is at least a conceivable one. Indeed

for Plato, seemingly subject to no such limitations (at least none that would indicate a 'stopping-point' during life).

60 Indeed, the presumption that one has in fact 'completed' the process of purification or 'perfected' one's philosophical knowledge is a sign that one has conspicuously failed to do so!

61 Cf. *Phaedrus* 278d and *Symposium* 204a–b.

62 See esp. 114c, where Socrates says that "those who have purified themselves sufficiently by philosophy *live in the future altogether without a body* [ζῶσι τὸ παράπαν εἰς τὸν ἔπειτα χρόνον]."

63 Among other things, notice that this scenario would involve a total absence of spoken or written language (and hence an absence philosophical dialogue, at least as we now conceive of it).

Plato implies elsewhere that there were times in the distant past and in pre-literate (or ‘barbarian’) ages when philosophy did not exist.⁶⁴ There is no conceptual problem, then, with there being a time in the future when philosophy no longer exists—when it comes to a final ending, so to speak. I am inclined to think that Plato would look favorably upon such a state of affairs, for it would indicate the ultimate triumph of reason. In a paradoxical (and perhaps perverse) way, then, the ideal achievement of philosophy is its own extinction.

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⁶⁴ In the *Timaeus*, for instance, human souls as well as the earth are all created—not having existed eternally—and thus there must have been an indefinite cosmic period when philosophy did not exist. Furthermore, in the myth that Critias recounts, there is an acknowledgement of times in human history when higher culture and learning do not exist (*Timaeus* 23a–b). Also see *Republic* 369cff., where the “city of pigs”—which may or may not be meant to be an historical account—presumably lacks philosophy.

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