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A Dramatic Interpretation of Plato's *Phaedo*

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No scene which presents itself to the imagination excites greater pathos than that of Socrates sitting on his prison couch and cheerfully drinking his cup of poison. Long after the reader has forgotten the wandering maze of arguments in Plato's *Phaedo*, he carries fixed in his mind the heroism of Socrates during his last day, his persistence in pursuing difficult arguments, and the nobility with which he meets his death. And Plato has achieved his aim, for the dialogue is not about the immortality of the soul—indeed, the arguments, as generally recognized, are unsuccessful—no, the dialogue is about the heroic death of Socrates and the proposition that only the philosopher—as epitomized in the person of Socrates—can meet death heroically.¹ For only the philosopher *knows* that he *cannot know* about the afterlife and the soul, and he is thus the *only one* who can die courageously.

The *Phaedo* shows, perhaps more than any other dialogue, how

¹ Cf. Paul Friedländer (*Plato*, Vol. I, tr. Hans Meyerhoff [Princeton 1969], p. 122), who says that all the Platonic dialogues are ultimately encomia to Socrates. Nietzsche too saw the figure of Socrates as charismatic or inspirational. Hans-Georg Gadamer (*Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, tr. P. Christopher Smith [New Haven and London 1980], p. 22) writes: "As Nietzsche has so aptly put it, this figure of the dying Socrates became the new ideal to which the noblest of the Greek youth now dedicated themselves instead of to that older heroic ideal, Achilles. Thus the *Phaedo's* poetic power to convince is stronger than its logical power to prove."

philosophy may be subordinated to drama in Plato.² Indeed, unless one understands the arguments, and sees their weakness, he will not

² Since Schleiermacher's insight that "Form and subject are inseparable, and no proposition is to be rightly understood except in its own place and with the combinations and limitations which Plato has assigned to it" (reprinted in *Great Thinkers on Plato*, ed. Barry Gross [New York 1979], p. 71), there has been a great deal of attention paid to drama in Plato. Friedländer, Jaeger (especially in Volume II of *Paideia, The Ideals of Greek Culture*, tr. G. Highet, Oxford 1943), Leo Strauss (*The City and the Man*, Chicago 1964), Allan Bloom (in the preface to his translation of the *Republic*, New York 1968), Jacob Klein (*A Commentary on Plato's Meno*, Chapel Hill 1965), and Drew Hyland ("Why Plato Wrote Dialogues," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 [1968]) discuss the importance of the dramatical parts of the dialogue. Wilamowitz (*Platon* Vol. 1, Berlin 1919, p. 123) suggests that the purpose of the early dialogues is poetic and imaginative—not profound or philosophical, in short, that their purpose is dramatic. While I would agree with Wilamowitz that the purpose may be dramatic, I do not agree that the purpose is not also philosophic or profound; as I hope to show for the *Phaedo* each may serve the other.

In the case of the *Phaedo*, some, while admitting the brilliance of the drama, do not admit its primacy. A. E. Taylor, for example (*Plato: The Man and His Work*, London 1926), says the dialogue shows Plato's dramatic art "at its ripe perfection" (p. 174), but thinks the dialogue is about "the divinity of the human soul, and 'imitation of God' as the right and reasonable mode of conduct" (p. 177). Raven (*Plato's Thought in the Making*, Cambridge 1965) praises the drama in passing, but says that the dialogue "is concerned as a whole . . . with the immortality of the soul" (p. 79).

The two who deal most with the dramatical qualities of the *Phaedo* are Kenneth Dorter, ("The Dramatic Aspect of Plato's *Phaedo* [*Dialogue* 9, 1970: 564–580]) and Gadamer (*op. cit.*). Dorter points out, in the manner of the followers of Strauss, a number of significant details (e.g., that 14 men were on Theseus' ship and 14 at Socrates' execution); and while he discusses details with insight, he does not seem to have a sense of the dramatic purpose of the whole. He argues that Socrates' purpose is to convince his audience not to fear death (p. 574). But quite inconsistently, he concludes that the lesson of the dialogue is that "If we wish to attain an immortality more meaningful and personal than the objective immortality in which all temporal things share equally, we must win it through a philosophical attempt to apprehend and assimilate ourselves to the immutable ground of what is." Dorter points out a number of details, and he is quite good at showing why some of the arguments are specious, but he fails to ask the fundamental question: *why does Plato allow Socrates to use obviously specious arguments?* Gadamer, having brilliantly shown that the arguments are invalid, argues (pp. 36–37) that the point of dialogue is that science, even the advanced science of Plato's day, cannot answer the important questions about human life and our understanding of it. We must, he says, "think beyond the surrounding world given to us in sense experience and beyond our finite existence." The growing scientific insight of Plato's time "does not obviate the need for thinking beyond the reality of the world, and it has no authority to contest religious convictions." Certainly Gadamer is right, that the dialogue shows us that even the best scientists, i.e., the Pythagoreans, cannot prove the immortality of the soul. But this is subordinate to the dramatic point: that for Socrates to be courageous, he must be aware that *he* does not know about the immortality of the soul; indeed, one of the reasons for the true philosopher's courage is that he knows the limits of his knowledge, he alone knows what he knows and does not know.

understand the drama of the dialogue except superficially; and it is towards the drama of Socrates' death that everything in the dialogue points.³ But seeing the weakness of the arguments is important only if one asks and then understands why the arguments are weak, and why their weakness is essential if Socrates is to behave heroically, and why, moreover, he is most heroic when his arguments are weakest.

Some of the master's arguments are refuted by the interlocutors, some by the dramatic situation.⁴ Socrates' initial statement was twofold: that the philosopher welcomes death (61c) and that we ought not to commit suicide because we are the property of the gods (62b).

³ The dramatic purpose of the dialogue is therefore to inspire by a means other than discursive reasoning. To be sure, one must see the faults in the arguments to be so moved. As Jaeger (p. 36) put it: "We feel Socrates' intellectual power by dramatically showing its more than intellectual effect on men" and again (p. 90), "Plato had often felt Socrates' power to guide men's souls. He must have known that as an author his own greatest and hardest task in recreating Socrates' teaching was to make his readers feel the same influence he had once felt himself." Aristotle had, of course, recognized the literary and mimetic quality of the dialogues, so much so that he had called them poetry (*Poetics* 1447b11). Cf. Julius Stenzel, *Plato's Method of Dialectic*, tr. D. J. Allan (Oxford 1940), p. 2. Indeed, Longinus, *On the Sublime* (13), maintains that Plato competed with Homer in poetic mimesis—surely for an effect that was emotional.

⁴ I shall present here the merest outline of the arguments, just enough to show where the arguments fail. That the arguments are unsound has been noted by most scholars (see below), despite a few ingenious attempts to rescue them (on these also see below). Here I wish merely to enable the reader to recollect the arguments and their failings. What I wish to do is show why the arguments must be weak for the dialogue to achieve its dramatic purpose, and why their intentional weakness is the dialogue's beauty and strength. Of course, that the arguments *must* be weak is also one of the points of the dialogue, for it is not possible in this life to form absolute proofs for the immortality of the soul.

The proofs are objected to generally by Friedländer (Vol. III, p. 36), who observes that they do not reach their goal; by A. E. Taylor (*op. cit.*, p. 103), who says: "In point of fact, the first two proofs are found to break down and the third, as Burnet observes, is said by Socrates (107b6) to need clear explanation. Thus it is plain that Plato did not mean to present the arguments as absolutely probative to his own mind." Raven acknowledges the difficulties though he will not discuss them (p. 103). J. H. Randall, Jr. (*Plato: Dramatist of the Life of Reason*, New York 1970, p. 215) declares: "The arguments are not to be taken literally: they are all myths and parables." Norman Gulley (*Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, London 1962) discusses difficulties with the arguments (pp. 32–33) and various inconsistencies (p. 47). Hackforth (*Plato's Phaedo*, New York 1955, p. 19), Klein (pp. 26, 108, 126), and J. B. Skemp (*The Theory of Motion in Plato's Later Dialogues*, Cambridge 1942, p. 7) all point out that Socrates hints at the inadequacy of his own proofs. Gadamer (p. 22) sums it up well: "The proofs of the immortality of the soul which follow one another in this discussion all have something deeply dissatisfying about them. . . . The arguments themselves are unconvincing, however much the human presence of Socrates is convincing."

Cebes correctly perceives that if the second part of Socrates' statement is true, then the first cannot be: a wise man would not be glad to leave masters so good and wise as the gods. Socrates' first argument on the immortality of the soul, the principle of generation from opposites, is equivocal and faulty right at the beginning, as Socrates shifts from all things which are born (70d) to things which have an opposite (70e)—surely a great reduction from many things to just a few.⁵ This argument is not refuted by the interlocutors, but Cebes brings an abrupt end to the discussion and urges Socrates to move on to another proof—that based on the theory of recollection.⁶ This theory is not refuted by any dialectical exchange; it is, however, effectively refuted by the dramatic elements of the dialogue: joke after joke reminds us that nobody can, even after it is explained, recall the doctrine of recollection.⁷ First Simmias begs to have it told to him (73a); later, after Socrates has explained the entire theory again, Simmias laments that when Socrates is dead, on the next day, nobody will be left who can explain the theory: in other words, it will have been forgotten (78a). The theory is, in addition, inadequate because, as Simmias observes (77a–b), even if it were valid, it would explain the existence of the soul only *before* birth, not *after* death.⁸ Socrates' third argument maintains that the soul lives free of the body in the realm of ideas and cannot be destroyed with the body because of its aloofness from things physical (and the death of the physical cannot be at the same time the death of the non-physical). The argument depends on the soul's having little or no communion with the body (80d) even during life. But Socrates himself does not seem convinced by his own argument, for if the soul were not

⁵ The argument equivocates by failing to distinguish properly between absolute and relative terms (cf. Friedländer, Vol. III, p. 45).

⁶ Objecting to the theory of recollection (*anamnesis*) is virtually a cottage industry among Plato scholars. On difficulties with the argument here see K. W. Mills' two articles, "Plato's *Phaedo* 74b7–c6," *Phronesis* 2 (1957), 128–147 and 3 (1958), 40–58; J. M. Rist, "Equals and Intermediates in Plato," *Phronesis* 9 (1964), 27–37; Dorothy Tarrant, "Plato, *Phaedo* 74a–b," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77 (1957), 125; Kenneth Dorter, "Equality, Recollection, and Purification," *Phronesis* 17 (1972), 198–218; and Gadamer, pp. 26 ff. The account of recollection is, according to these scholars, incomplete and inadequate, and even Tarrant's variant reading won't save it. For a summary of the inconsistencies and a citation of more literature, see Richard J. Ketchum, "Knowledge and Recollection in the *Phaedo*: An Interpretation of 74a–75b," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17 (1979), 243.

⁷ On a similar joke on memory, see *Meno* 71c and the discussion of the joke in William S. Cobb, Jr., "Anamnesis: Platonic Doctrine or Sophistic Absurdity?" *Dialogue* 12 (1973), 604–28.

⁸ And, of course, the theory of recollection is mired in the problem of infinite regress (i.e., whence the original knowledge?). See Cobb, esp. pp. 619–21.

connected to the body in some way, why should the body be a prison to it?⁹ And he seems to deny the non-physical nature of the soul as he draws his argument to a close. He says, "Because each pleasure and pain like a nail nails the soul to the body and affixes it and makes it bodily. . ." (83d).¹⁰ If, then, a pleasure and pain can affect the soul, why not death? That Socrates' principal interlocutors are dissatisfied with the arguments—as they should be—is made abundantly clear when Simmias and Cebes, whispering to one another, are interrupted by Socrates, who says (84c): "Indeed, there are a good many doubts and objections, if one cares to go through the argument with adequate thoroughness." Simmias, thus prodded, agrees (85d): "You see, Socrates, when I reflect on what has been said by me and Cebes here, it does not appear quite adequate."

Socrates, after several important speeches to be considered shortly, takes up Simmias' argument that the soul is an attunement and Cebes' argument that the soul, like the last overcoat of a tailor, may outlive its wearer. Socrates' refutation of Simmias depends on earlier arguments, for the refutation rests on the soul's existence before the body's; that is, the soul cannot be like an attunement because the soul existed before the body, but the attunement did not exist before the harp. But, of course, this argument depends on arguments which were found unsatisfactory by Simmias and Cebes (in the passage referred to above, where Simmias says the previous arguments have been unsatisfactory).¹¹ If the previous arguments, which sought to prove that the soul existed before the body, were inadequate, then this refutation, which depends on those earlier arguments, must be similarly inadequate. Socrates' refutation of Cebes' argument depends on the proposition that souls, which by definition contain life, cannot receive the opposite of life and remain souls: they must withdraw before death and fly elsewhere.¹² Socrates draws an analogy with

⁹ See Burnet, Taylor, *ad loc.* See also T. M. Robinson, *Plato's Psychology* (Toronto and Buffalo 1970), pp. 21–22; also Gadamer, pp. 27–29.

¹⁰ Translations of passages from the *Phaedo* are the author's. Others are as cited in the text.

¹¹ For a severe criticism of the arguments on attunement, with a lucid explication of its illogicality, see W. F. Hicken, "Phaedo 92a11–94b3," *Classical Quarterly* 48 (1954), 16–22.

¹² The fallacies are subtle, but have not escaped the commentators. For a very good discussion of how at the beginning of the argument *ἀθάνατος* is the opposite of *θάνατος*, but at the end it is the opposite of *θνητός*, see David Keyt, "The Fallacies in *Phaedo* 102a–107b," *Phronesis* 8 (1963), 170 ff. The view is also that of T. L. Landmann, "Tendenz und Gedankengang des platonischen Dialogs 'Phaedo,'" *Gymnasialprogramm* (Königsberg in Pr., 1871), p. 8 and of G. Schneider, *Die Weltanschauung Platons dargestellt in Anschlüsse an den Dialog Phaedon* (Berlin 1898), pp. 106–108. T.

snow: when snow receives fire it will not remain snow, but it will either retreat or be destroyed. Snow is, however, destroyed by fire and does not, even if it is made into a snowman, get up on its legs and run away. The argument is seductive, but is rather silly when studied carefully.¹³ And though Socrates' interlocutors seem to agree, they do admit to doubts.¹⁴ Simmias, at the end of the dialogue's dialectical portions, when Socrates has completed his "refutation" of Cebes, says (107a-b):

I myself do not find anything to disbelieve in what has been said. *But the arguments are about a great subject, and I do distrust human frailty, and I am still compelled to feel doubt in my own mind about what we have said.*

After approving of Simmias' skepticism, Socrates launches into his myth on the habitations of the soul after death and the description of the earth. As various commentators on Plato have observed, Socrates tells a myth when the arguments have gone about as far as they can; where logical reasoning and certainty end, speculation in the form of myth begins.¹⁵

Elsewhere, when Socrates discusses the nature of the soul, he also brings in myth, and the very act of telling the myth seems to be for

M. Robinson (pp. 27-29), having discussed the difficulties, concludes that "one interpretation introduces as many anomalies as it is meant to solve." D. O'Brien, in two long articles ("The Last Argument of Plato's *Phaedo* I and II," *Classical Quarterly* 17 [1967], 198-231 and 18 [1968], 95-106), while finding fault with the argument sees some use in it for the historian of philosophy, since he says it anticipates Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God. See also Hackforth (p. 164), who says that "from the standpoint of logic, the argument has petered out into futility"; I. A. Crombie (*An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, Vol. II, London 1962), who calls the argument "a nest of confusions" (p. 169) and says the conclusion follows "if we do not look too closely" (p. 164); and J. B. Skemp (p. 8), who describes the final proof as "a blatant *petitio principii*"; also Gadamer (pp. 34-36).

¹³ The argument, however, is not without some defenders. Dorothea Frede, "The Final Proof of the Immortality of the Soul in Plato's *Phaedo* 102a-107a," *Phronesis* 23 (1978), 27-41, thinks that Socrates is certain about the last argument. But Gregory Vlastos ("Reasons and Causes in the *Phaedo*" [*Modern Studies in Philosophy: Plato: I. Metaphysics and Epistemology. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Garden City 1971]), while defending what he sees to be the most important argument (that which takes place in 95e-105e), admits that it is not "entirely clear or wholly true" (p. 133).

¹⁴ Cf. Gadamer, p. 36: "As convincing as the discussion might have been, the conclusion is drawn that the proofs are not sufficient and that one must continue to test their premises insofar as is humanly possible. Evidently in questions of this sort one cannot expect greater certainty." See also Stenzel, p. 8.

¹⁵ Cf., for example, Friedländer, Vol. I, pp. 189-90; J. A. Stewart, *The Myths of Plato* (London and New York 1905), pp. 24-102 *passim*; S. Rosen, *The Symposium of Plato* (New Haven and London 1968), pp. 207-11; W. Jaeger, pp. 151-52.

him an admission that scientific knowledge is impossible. Hence it is necessary to give a similitude, a metaphorical and speculative account of the nature of the unknowable. In the *Phaedrus*, when Socrates is delivering his "serious" speech on the nature of love, he says concerning the soul:

What the nature of the soul is would be a long tale to tell, and *most assuredly only a god alone could tell it*, but what it resembles, that a man might tell in briefer compass (246a).

A bit later he extends our imprecision to the "immortal": "immortal" is a term applied on the basis of no reasoned argument at all, but our fancy (*πλάττομεν*) pictures the god whom we have never seen, nor fully conceived, as an immortal living being" (246c) [tr. R. Hackforth]. Or, as Timaeus explains to Socrates when he is about to tell his myth concerning the generation of the gods and the cosmos (*Timaeus* 29c-d):

If then, Socrates, amidst the many opinions about the gods [the immortals] and the generation of the universe, we are not able to give notions which are altogether and in every respect exact and consistent with one another, do not be surprised. Enough if we adduce probabilities as likely as any others, for we must remember that I who am the speaker and you who are the judges are only mortal men, and we would do well to accept the tale which is probable and inquire no further [tr. B. Jowett].

For Plato and Socrates, then, the realm of the divine was not absolutely knowable by mortal men. The soul's immortality, which caused it to be most like to the divine (*Phaedo* 80b), also prevented it from being understood by human reason (*logos*).¹⁶ Socrates' very making of a myth, then, shows that he himself does not believe the soul's immortality a matter which can be proven. This is not to say, of course, that the myth has no value. As Friedländer and others have argued, the real value of the myth lies in moving the soul towards virtue by a means which bypasses discursive reasoning and affects the soul directly, a means we may call, in a non-Platonic context, "inspiration."¹⁷ And this is clearly a chief purpose of the myth here, as Socrates discusses in the context of the soul's future

¹⁶ On the equivalence of immortality and divinity, see W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. IV (Cambridge 1975), p. 330. Cf. Rosen (*op. cit.*): "The *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*, and *Timaeus* all teach us that it is impossible to grasp the immortal and divine by means of *logos*" (p. 209).

¹⁷ Inspiration may be the way art in general functions: it does not work by shaping the reason in men, but works instead by a direct grasp on the soul. Thus poets, seers, and prophets operate by inspiration and deliver their messages without *knowing*

habitations the need to make sure that the soul is pure and virtuous in this world (107 ff.).

Thus the arguments, by their failure, and the myths, by their very presence, point to the impossibility—at least in our mortal state—of knowing about the afterlife. Indeed, time after time, repeated through the dialogue is the insistence that we cannot know for sure. Thus Socrates begins the dialogue (63b-c):

I will *try* to be more persuasive to you than I was to my judges. If I did not *believe*, Simmias and Cebes, that I should pass over first to other gods, both wise and good . . . I should be wrong not objecting to death; but know well that I *hope* I shall enter the company of good men, even though I would not affirm it confidently; but that I shall come to gods who are very good masters, know well that if I would affirm confidently anything else, I would affirm this.

Later (85c), Simmias, voicing his objections to some of Socrates' arguments, says:

For it seems to me, as perhaps also to you, Socrates, that to know clearly about such matters in this present life is impossible, or at least extremely difficult.

And at the end of the dialogue, when Socrates has described his vision of the afterlife, he concludes (114d):

It is not fitting for a sensible man to affirm confidently that such things are just as I have described; but that this or something of this sort is what happens to our souls and their abodes, and since the soul is clearly immortal, that this is so seems proper and *worth the risk* of believing; for the risk is noble.

The dialectic on the immortality of the soul confirms these statements that absolute knowledge about such matters is impossible. If the arguments prove anything, it is this. But not all men, of course, know that absolute knowledge about such matters is impossible. Indeed, some believe certain legends (70c) that there is an afterlife, just as others believe (70a) that when a man dies the soul leaves the body and goes out like a breath or whiff of smoke; the many, however, do not understand and do not think about these matters. That is why, says Socrates (64b), the many do not understand the sense in which the philosopher wants to die. The many think they know

what they mean (*Apology* 22c). Statesmen, too, because of the absence of teachers, cannot have been taught virtue and must have received it by a divine inspiration (*Meno* 99d). Cf. also *Laws* 682a, 719c. And as Friedländer observes (*op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 190), Socrates in the *Phaedo*, *Gorgias*, and *Republic* often speaks of the purpose of myths as inspiration to virtuous conduct.

whether there is or is not an afterlife. But—at least if he has been through the conversation of the *Phaedo*—the philosopher *knows* that he does not know about the future habitations and state of the soul.

It is for this reason—that the philosopher alone *knows* that he does not know the future condition of his soul—that the philosopher is the only one who can die courageously.¹⁸ An earlier dialogue, the *Laches*, had grappled with the question of courage. That dialogue appeared to be aporetic, for there courage was shown to be a kind of knowledge, like the other virtues.¹⁹ But if courage were knowledge of the outcome, what bravery would be involved in the action? For example, if a fully equipped army were going against one armed only with toothpicks, the powerful army would have knowledge that it would be victorious: no courage would therefore be involved; and the weak army would have knowledge it was going to lose; and it would therefore be rash, not courageous, in joining battle. But the *Laches* did contain the clue to courage: it is knowledge of your ignorance of the outcome, with a willingness to persevere. Only the man who knows that he does not know the outcome will go into battle courageously; and the philosopher will be the most courageous of men—for he, like Socrates, is most aware that he does not know the outcome.

Here lies, I think, the true meaning of the weak nature of the arguments in the *Phaedo*. The dialogue is not, of course, about the immortality of the soul; it is about the death of Socrates. It is about the very things Echecrates inquired of Phaedo (57a): “What was it the man said before his death? And how did he die?” The dialogue is about the courageous way in which Socrates died; if one does not see how and why the arguments fail to provide certain knowledge of the soul, one cannot see the courage in facing death and Socrates’ heroism.

Socrates’ courage is brilliant. When Cebes objects to his arguments concerning suicide, Socrates is pleased (63a). And yet why should Socrates be pleased? Socrates’ argument that suicide is wrong rested on the assumption that we have good masters here on earth and that we should not violate their proprietary rights by killing ourselves,

¹⁸ Socrates says too (*Phaedo* 68c) that only the philosopher is courageous in the right way.

¹⁹ In the *Laches* it is suggested that courage is an endurance of the soul; the dialogue seemed aporetic because it seemed that courage could be neither knowledge nor ignorance. My suggestion is in keeping with Socrates’ position throughout the dialogues: knowledge of ignorance is a *kind of* knowledge; courage is a special kind of ignorance—ignorance of the outcome; it is also an endurance of the soul in seeking the outcome.

who are their property; but if our masters are so good, Cebes has asked, why should the philosopher be *glad* to leave them? It was necessary for Socrates' argument to be sound so that Socrates could face death with confidence: Socrates should not therefore be pleased that his argument was defeated. Yet he is pleased; and his pleasure is heroic: it places in jeopardy his equanimity, but the promise of an argument holds the prize of truth before him.

Crito warns Socrates that, if he talks, he may have to take extra doses of poison. Socrates is impatient with such matters, and disdaining Crito's concern declares (63e): "Oh, let the jailer be; let him do his job and be ready to give me two portions, even three." After the arguments on recollection, Socrates consoles his friends: yes, there will surely be someone in Hellas, large as it is, who will help them overcome their fear of death (78a).

But nowhere is Socrates more heroic than in the great central portion of the dialogue, when Simmias and Cebes express their penetrating objections to his theories. First, he must force them to express their objections. Socrates is himself aware that the argument may be weak (84c):

Indeed, there are a good many doubts and objections, if one cares to go through the argument with adequate thoroughness.

Simmias affirms that he and Cebes are unsure of the arguments but are reluctant to trouble Socrates in case he is distressed by the approaching execution. As before, when Cebes objected to this theory on suicide, Socrates displays good humor. Socrates laughs and launches into his famous comparison of himself and a swan, the bird sacred to Apollo (84e-85b). Again, as in virtually all the dialogues, Socrates distinguishes himself from the many, who do not understand; in this case what they do not understand is the nature of the swan's song. Socrates' position is dangerous by any standards: he is urging his interlocutors to come forward with the strongest possible objections to his arguments. The greatest possible courage will be necessary to confront them.

At this point (88c) the outer dialogue, the framing narrative, is interrupted as Phaedo tells Echecrates that those present, while they had been convinced by earlier arguments, were now beginning to doubt the whole business. Echecrates asks Phaedo many questions about both the discussion and Socrates' demeanor. Phaedo answers that Socrates was never more wondrous than then. Philosophy, we remember from the *Theaetetus*, begins in wonder; and surely philosophy is provoked by the wondrous majesty of Socrates on the day of his execution.

Phaedo compares Socrates to Heracles with the advantage going to Socrates, for Socrates will have to contest alone with two opponents—Simmius and Cebes—while Heracles had the aid of Iolaus in fighting the Hydra (89c). Socrates, with ironic modesty, jokes that he is merely Iolaus, but Phaedo corrects him. The comparison to the mightiest Greek hero—with Socrates clearly named as the superior (for he will fight single-handedly with two where Heracles fought with only one)—shows that the others present also recognize that Socrates is a hero.

No part of the dialogue shows Socrates more a teacher of philosophic courage than the speech he launches into on “misology”—the hating of argument (*logos*) (89d ff.). Repeated dead-ends in argument may lead, Socrates warns, to a hating of arguments in general; but a philosopher must stick to his post. The difficulty in avoiding misology comes from having to engage in arguments to gain the truth, but until the truth is gained the outcome is uncertain: one cannot know the end of the argument—whether it will be a dead-end or a live birth of an idea—until the argument is over. But if, because of difficulties, the philosopher does persist in the argument but comes to hate *logos*, he will certainly never get at the truth; to persist in the argument requires courage: courage, the knowledge that he does not know the outcome, but the persistence to endure. The passage on *misology* is, really, more important than the arguments on immortality insofar as it presents the doctrine of philosophical courage while the arguments merely show that courage in force. Socrates is himself providing the model of argument, for he is a lover of *logos*; and despite the aporetic nature of his arguments, he dies sticking to his philosophic post, pursuing the truth to the end.²⁰ And later, when he has taken up Cebes’ argument, Socrates will heroically exclaim: “Let us go attack like Homeric heroes, and see what strength there is in what you say” (95b).

The arguments over, Socrates, nobly risking belief in the happy futurity of his soul, cheerfully drinks the hemlock, and in that simple action does his civic duty with the same courage we observed in argument. How can Socrates face death with such calm, indeed with

²⁰ This courage was characteristic of Socrates in his youth, too. The exercise of this youthful courage is the focus of the autobiographical passage: when Socrates saw the difficulties in the positions of the various philosophers and especially of Anaxagoras, whose positions were the most promising, far from becoming a *misologue*, he began his independent search for wisdom. In a similarly heroic passage, Socrates says in the *Meno* (86b) that it is far more courageous to find out what is not known than to say that, since it is impossible to learn the truth, there is no need to try.

such cheer? Why should knowing his ignorance enable him to be so serene?

Socrates' knowledge of his ignorance is what has given him philosophic life. Ever since Chaerephon told him of the Delphic oracle that there was no man wiser than he (*Apology* 21a), Socrates' mission has been to test the truth of the pronouncement. His life has been spent going from one person who believed himself wise to another and demonstrating to each that though he thought he was wise he was not really so. Socrates found that he was wiser than the others, for he alone knew that he did not know. Politicians claimed to know about statecraft but did not really know; poets claimed to know about poetry but did not understand their own poems. But Socrates at least knew that he did not know—here lay his superior wisdom (*Apology* 21b–23b). In this sense he is true to his life's mission even here in the *Phaedo*. He has spoken with students of philosophy, with followers of Pythagoras (Simmias and Cebes), and we must not forget that it was the *Pythagoreans* who claimed to know about the immortality of the soul. And again he has done as always: he has shown those who might presume to know that they did not know. In this sense the dialogue is true to the form of the aporetic dialogues—those which searched for but failed to discover the truth.

But in a larger and profounder sense, it was this knowledge of ignorance which enabled Socrates to be a philosopher at all. For a philosopher, we know from the *Symposium*, is imbued with philosophic *ἔρως*. That is, he is an intermediary between knowledge and ignorance. As Diotima tells Socrates (*Symposium* 203e f.):

Love stands midway between ignorance and wisdom. You must understand that none of the gods are seekers after truth. They do not long for wisdom, because they are wise—and why should the wise be seeking wisdom that is already theirs? Nor, for that matter, do the ignorant seek the truth or yearn to be made wise. [tr. M. Joyce]

Only the man aware of his own ignorance, the one pulled by love towards wisdom, can be a philosopher. Socrates, knowing that he is to die, believes that he will soon find this wisdom which he has been seeking, if it is to be found. For this wisdom is not to be found in mortal life. The truth about the immortality of the soul cannot be discovered by argument: it must be discovered experientially. His eagerness to learn and the possibility of learning the truth account for his cheer.

And finally, Socratic ignorance is, of course, not *absolute* ignorance. It is ignorance mingled with knowledge. The man courageous in battle perseveres despite knowing that he is ignorant of the outcome—

whether he will win or lose. But in another sense he knows the alternatives and faces them nevertheless. Either he will be victorious or he will die honorably—alternatives both noble. Socrates, as he has said in the *Apology* (40c–d), also knows the alternatives: either he will enjoy a dreamless sleep or he will go to that happy realm to which his virtue and philosophy have entitled him. He knows the alternatives and he knows his ignorance, an ignorance he had mentioned with great clarity in the *Apology* (29a–b):

For let me tell you, gentlemen, that to be afraid of death is only another form of thinking that one is wise when one is not; it is to think that one knows what one does not know. No one knows with regard to death whether it is not really the greatest blessing that can happen to a man, but people dread it as though they were certain that it is the greatest evil, and this ignorance, which thinks that it knows what it does not, must surely be ignorance most culpable. This I take it, gentlemen, is the degree, and this is the nature of my advantage over the rest of mankind, and if I were to claim to be wiser than my neighbor in any respect, it would be in this—that not possessing any real knowledge of what comes after death, I am also conscious that I do not possess it. [tr. Hugh Tredennick]

At the end of the dialogue, Socrates' friends weep at his fate. Perhaps, had they been convinced by the arguments for the immortality of the soul, they would bear calmly the master's death. Their weeping seems to be a dramatic corroboration of their lack of conviction that the arguments of the present conversation, at least, have been airtight. It may be suggested, however, that there remains a possibility at a later time of finding such a proof. Such a possibility would not affect the drama of the moment: Socrates has done his very best, but as so often in his life, the truth has eluded him and again he has discovered that he does not know. Have the interlocutors learned that *they* cannot know about the soul's immortality? Simmias had spoken earlier (85c) about the impossibility or at least extreme difficulty of such knowledge. Perhaps here at the end the weeping of Socrates' friends is an acknowledgment that without Socrates they may not be able to escape perplexity (*ἀπορία*) on this matter; or perhaps it suggests that they are not up to Socrates' high standards, that despite their wish to please the master, their courage is not so great as his. This weakness was alluded to earlier, when Cebes admitted that there was in him "a little boy who has a childish" fear of death (77e) in need of a Socratic charm to purge the fear. Perhaps only the master has so developed the man in his soul as to possess the courage necessary to face the uncertainty in death. The friends' lack of composure in the face of Socrates' calm perhaps shows that Socrates

is the only true philosopher and shows too how lonely a condition that is.

In the *Crito* Socrates had told of his dream in which a woman came to him and said that on the third day he would be home in Phthia (44b). The line, from Book IX of the *Iliad* (363), was originally spoken by Achilles to the embassy, when Achilles declared to Odysseus that he was leaving Troy the next day and would arrive home on the third. That line could not help but contrast the situation of the two men. Achilles had voluntarily left battle; his departure for home would leave the Greeks in a state of perplexity concerning the conduct of the war; indeed, his prayer would be fulfilled and there would be nothing between the Greeks and destruction. Socrates, though condemned by his own people, did not flee Athens; but his departure from life would similarly leave his people in great perplexity. The failure to come to a conclusion in the dialogue made that perplexity, that ἀπορία, all the more apparent. When Socrates left his prison house of Athens, the city's soul was departing, leaving for its eternal home.

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