Notes on Plato and Nietzsche

Tues, Jan 15

The first question of the *Phaedo* is the first sentence of the dialogue, and the first word of that sentence is the hinge on which the question turns: *autos*, the intensive adjective pronoun. Echecrates to Phaedo: *You yourself* were present for the conversation between Socrates and his friends on the last day of his life?

The first answer of the dialogue is: *autos*. *I myself* was there.

From the very beginning of the *Phaedo*, then—literally, from the *very first word*—the question put at issue is whether the conversation recounted in the work is a first-hand report. Echecrates is anxious to learn the facts from an eye-witness, apparently because he wants to trust that his informant's report is reliable. He will later request that Phaedo relate all that happened (*tauta dê panta*) as clearly, as manifestly, as possible (*hôs saphestata*). What's at issue here is authority, and thereby veracity.

Within the frame of the dialogue the account is first-hand. Phaedo was present for the conversation; Echecrates can rely on his report. But then Phaedo reports that Plato was *not* present for the conversation ('Plato, I think, was unwell'). A surprising turn, that, and it cues us readers to reconsider this question of veracity, but now not as between Phaedo and Echecrates, but rather as between Plato and ourselves.

That Plato calls his authority into question like this generates something akin to dramatic irony. His absence from the conversation he purportedly reports in the dialogue has no particular relevance for Echecrates or Phaedo, but for us it resonates deeply. It subverts Plato's credibility as a source of information. And since Plato himself has manufactured this, and brought it to our attention, he has, in a sense, allied himself with us *against* his characters. He communicates with us behind their backs, as it were. The irony Plato generates here is not quite—or not only—the irony of the ancient tragedies; it's rather a variety with which we're familiar in our own day, namely, irony as detachment from the truth-claims implied by one's own statements. [On this see Rorty CIS, p. 73.] Therefore, here near the beginning of the work, Plato intimates that he doesn't believe what his Socrates says—and maybe, by implication, that we shouldn't either.

So the *Phaedo* fails, as it were, the first test put within the dialogue itself. What is wanted *within* the work is a first-hand account, yet Plato suggests that *with* the work he doesn't intend to provide this. Echecrates is none the wiser for this, but we readers understand that on this irony hangs the character of the dialogue as fact or fiction, as a *logos* or a *mythos*.

Th, Jan 17

The second question of the *Phaedo* addresses the things Socrates said before he died, and how he died. Later, Echecrates asks more specifically about Socrates' death, again employing the intensifying *autos*. He wants to know

about the death *itself*—*auton ton thanaton*—and even more specifically about the things said and done (*ta lechthenta kai prachthenta*) at the death itself, which can only mean the things Socrates said and did during the minutes or moments immediately preceding his death. In this way Plato directs our attention from the beginning to the end of the dialogue.

What do we find there?

Of course we find Socrates' famous 'last words,' his request that Crito sacrifice a rooster to Asclepius. [Explain the relevant background here: Asclepius son of Apollo, god of healing, etc.] But we'll come back to his last words. For now, the broader context in which Socrates speaks includes also his *last act*, which can't be inconsequential given that Plato, by way of Echecrates' request, explicitly calls our attention to it. Let's look then at 'the things done' at Socrates' death itself.

After Socrates drinks the poison, everyone in the room breaks down, crying and wailing. Phaedo even covers his face, to hide his tears or to hide himself from the scene before him. Socrates rebukes his friends for their commotion, then, after walking around a bit, he lies down. And sometime after lying down he covers himself, presumably with a sheet, as with a death shroud. He literally has to uncover himself to address Crito. Then, after having done so, he covers himself again [this isn't noted in the text, but it's implied by the official's having to uncover him to confirm that he's dead]. And finally he moves, presumably an involuntary death-spasm (hence the passive voice, *ekinêthê*), which prompts the official to uncover him.

Obviously, Socrates' covering, uncovering, and covering himself are the most significant of his last acts. They're certainly the most unexpected. The official had directed him to walk around and then lie down, so there's nothing unusual there. But his covering himself is strange, uncanny even. It wasn't common practice for a dying man to cover himself [I demonstrate this exhaustively in my *Plato and Nietzsche*—cite one or two examples]. In fact, the action seems to have functioned in some contexts as an initiatory act, and in Plato in particular it's connected to purification, as we'll see.

Now recall my mentioning that Phaedo covered his face, and also that the official uncovered Socrates to confirm that he was dead. Here then at the end of the dialogue we have a sudden commotion of covering and uncovering, and these acts appear in the text as two pairs of symmetrical oppositions: covering-uncovering-covering-uncovering. (Phaedo covers himself; Socrates uncovers himself, after having covered himself; the official uncovers Socrates: note that the subjects of the pairs overlap, with Socrates taking the second place in the first pair and the first place of the second pair.)

And these are just the acts noted explicitly in the text. In reality there would be: Phaedo covering and uncovering himself; Socrates covering, uncovering, then covering himself, and the official uncovering and covering Socrates (though it's possible that it was Crito who covered Socrates, after closing his mouth and eyes).

This is all very odd, and one can't help but wonder what Plato intended by stressing these strange details. Remember that he explicitly calls our attention to 'the things done'

(*ta...prachthenta*) at the moment of the death itself (*auton*). That he means for us to note the oppositions of covering and uncovering is suggested by these words clustering at the end of the text. They appear nowhere else in the dialogue, but here are four instances within a single Stephanus page, the final three just words part, the second and third literally back to front: Socrates uncovered himself, for he had covered himself (*ekkalupsamenos enekekalupto*). [Read aloud the relevant excerpts of the text, in the Greek—the rhythm of the two words describing Socrates is striking.]

Earlier I mentioned covering in the context of initiation. As Mary recently called to my attention, the Lovatelli urn in the *Museo Nazionale Romano* depicts Herakles being initiated into the Lesser Eleusinian Mysteries by way of a purificatory act which involves his being covered with a veil. And this of course recalls Demeter, who while morning for her lost daughter, Persephone, sat with her head veiled before the two were reunited, in celebration of which she founded the Greater Mysteries. [Other relevant examples in PN.] But more directly related to the *Phaedo* is the *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates covers his head before delivering his first speech, and then uncovers himself before delivering his second speech explicitly as an act of purification.

Initiates of the Mysteries sought to secure for themselves a blessed afterlife, which is the subject of much of Socrates' second speech in the *Phaedrus*, and which also is, of course, a major theme of the *Phaedo*. Should we therefore conclude that Socrates' last act was aimed at a purificatory initiation? If so, an initiation into what exactly? I must confess that in the end I don't know. It's a riddle every bit as enigmatic as

Socrates' last words and—and of this I'm convinced—bound up with them.

Tues, Jan 22

Consider Socrates' first words of substance on the morning of his death. [I mean to exclude his asking Crito to see to the departure of his wife and children.] The chains have just been removed from his legs, and as he rubs his thighs he formulates a *mythos* about 'what men call' pleasure and its 'apparent opposite,' pain. One can't have one without the other following after, he says. And if Aesop had noticed this, he might have composed a '*mython*' about a god's being unable to reconcile these warring opposites and so joining them at the head.

So Aesop, *mythoi*, and apparent oppositions are on Socrates' mind first thing in the morning. And his naming Aesop prompts Cebes to inquire about his composing poems in prison. Socrates explains that a dream had often come to him throughout his life urging him to 'practice *mousikê*.' He had always thought the dream was encouraging him to continue practicing philosophy, the supreme form of *mousikê*. But now as he confronts the end of his life, he thought it best to consider whether the dream intended him to practice the popular art of poetry.

But Socrates was not a poet. He had to borrow themes from Aesop because, as a philosopher, he deals with *logoi*, not, like the poets, with *mythoi*. He is not a *mythologikos*, he says. [NB: this word is formed by the pairing of apparent opposites.]

Socrates not a *mythologikos*?! But he began his morning with a *mythos*! His first thoughts on his last day were bound up with *mythoi*! And as we'll see, he blurs the apparent distinction between *logos* and *mythos* throughout the ensuing conversation, and at key moments too. At 61e, for instance, he suggests it's fitting to *mythologein* about his upcoming journey to the underworld. And this just moments after claiming he's not a *mythologikos*! And in fact he says here that it's fitting to *mythologein* until sunset, which incorporates the entire conversation into the scope of this verb, not just some small segment of it. More, at 70b he introduces his three main 'proofs' that the soul is immortal, ostensibly the central *logos* of the dialogue, by suggesting that they *diamythologômen* the matter. Later, at 110b, he calls his account of the true surface of the earth a *mythos*, and he concludes the conversation by referring to the whole thing as a *mythos* (114d).

So. Socrates, as a character in the dialogue, claims he's not a *mythologikos*. But Plato as the author makes him contradict himself. With his own words. This cannot be accidental. In fact I suspect it's another way for Plato to distance himself ironically from his central character. And let me just say this about that: in the gap (I resist writing *abyss*) between Plato's Socrates and Plato himself we just might discover, at a level deeper than Socrates' arguments for Platonic dogma, insight into Plato's thinking-life.

Th, Jan 24

Now into the *Phaedo*'s matrix of meaning and allusion comes Nietzsche, with his several accounts of *the dying Socrates* [in

BT, GS, TI: we'll consider the latter two works later]. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Socrates is the original instance and paradigm of the *theoretical man*, the master of optimistic dialectic, which we may sum up in the proposition that through the proper use of reason we can understand being and correct existence. The world is comprehensible in full, and the pains of human embodied life can be healed. The healing drug is called *reason*, its effect on the sickly organism is summed up in the word *virtue*, and the consequent spiritual state of well-being is *happiness*. In a formula, reason equals virtue equals happiness, as Nietzsche puts it in *Twilight of the Idols*. Through reason one can know virtue; he who knows virtue will be virtuous; the virtuous are happy. Hence the imperturbable calm with which Socrates confronts his death, provokes it even (through his conduct at trial—the Athenians would have preferred to exile him). His knowledge has liberated him from the fear of death.

As a young man Plato aspired to be a tragedian, but he was so enraptured by the image of the dying Socrates that he burned his tragic poems and dedicated himself to the Socratic way of life. [I'm still paraphrasing N here.] But his natural artistic impulse was too vigorous simply to dissipate. It welled up and expressed itself in a new form of poetry, which combined narrative, lyric, and drama, poetry and prose, a precursor in a sense to the novel.

Here it's worth pausing to observe that Plato's copious output of writing marks a significant departure from the Socratic way of life, given that Socrates famously wrote nothing—nothing anyway besides the Aesopian verses and the hymn to Apollo he composed in prison (to assume for

now the veracity of this detail). Socrates was a public talker; Plato was a private writer.

But be this as it may, Nietzsche's not impressed. He insists that as a writer Plato *subordinates* poetry to prose; the *mythos* in his work is a mere *ancilla* to the *logos*, art a handmaid to science. In this way tragedy finally died—Plato drove through the heart of tragedy the dagger of reason which Socrates had forged—and the tragic worldview yielded to the therapeutic. And this anti-tragic, anti-Greek, rational-scientific perspective eventually overspread the west like a virus (exploiting Christianity as a carrier for a time).

But Nietzsche points to Socrates' dream ('practice *mousikê*') as an indication that Socrates had his doubts about 'the limits of logic.' And in this context he introduces the type of the 'musical Socrates,' the man who pursues science to the point at which it bites its own tail—presumably in the Kantian-Schopenhauerian insight that science cannot fathom the depths of nature, but can only track the causal relationships that operate within, and *as*, the representation, the *phaenomena*. [Elaborate: Later Nietzsche rejects the details of Schopenhauer's idealism, but he continues to insist that scientific knowledge of causes does not grasp unadulterated truth. This is his so-called falsificationism. The scientist's belief in truth is the last remnant of the ascetic ideal, as fully as metaphysical and misguided as the Christian's belief in God (we'll go into all this in detail if we have time for the 'Third Essay' of the *Genealogy* later in the semester).] In any case, the musical Socrates is the man who pursues science to the point of its dead end, who then realizes that art is the

'necessary correlative of, and supplement for, science.' This is the return of the tragic insight: science cannot after all know and correct being.

Science in the end turns into art, Nietzsche says. The regeneration of art and myth is somehow the teleological necessity of science. More, religion and science are themselves manifestations of art, poetry, myth. Science is art which temporarily—perhaps even for millennia—mistakes itself for something else.

It is standard to claim that with his expression 'the Socrates who practices music' Nietzsche intends to allude to himself. This may well be right. And if he did intend this, I for one would agree with him. But I would add that *Plato* is the *original of this type*. The surface of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* suggests that he would disagree, and maybe he would—*if* he's serious that Plato subordinated poetry to prose, art to science as dialectic. But does he really mean this? In *Beyond Good and Evil* he writes that Plato was 'too noble' for Socratism. Plato *used* Socrates, as an 'audacious interpreter' picks up a popular tune to 'vary it into the infinite and impossible—namely, into all of his own masks and multiplicities.'

So Socrates is a mask behind which Plato hides—though he reveals himself simultaneously through the masterful variations he plays on Socrates' original tune. And here I think of the striking stretch in BT 15 where, specifically in the context of discussing *the dying Socrates*, while contrasting Socrates as the theoretical man with the artist, Nietzsche deploys a barrage of words for covering and uncovering. The man of science is fascinated with the act of uncovering

(*Enthüllung*), and with studying every discarded cover (*Hülle*), whereas the artist is enraptured by the cover (*Hülle*) that always remains, even after every successful act of uncovering (*Enthüllung*). And this recalls a similar flurry of these same words in GS 339, which includes the claim that the highest summit of good things remains concealed and covered (*Verhülltes*) for most observers, even for the best of us, and that that which does uncover (*enthüllt*) itself for us, uncovers (*enthüllt*) itself only once—precisely as Socrates uncovered himself one time only at the end of his life. This section by the way immediately precedes Nietzsche's second discussion of *the dying Socrates*, in which he refers to Socrates' last words as *verhüllten*—disguised, masked, literally, covered.

All this is to suggest that Nietzsche, unlike the many scholars who have scrutinized Socrates' last words, was struck—as I too am struck—by the interplay of the *Phaedo*'s final covering-uncovering oppositions. For him it serves as an image of the differences between the artist and the man of science. He doesn't speculate as to its meaning for Plato.

But what should *we* make of it? Does Plato mean somehow to reveal himself behind the mask of Socrates? The artist behind the aspiring knower? Is he finally lowering the veil, killing Socrates that he himself may live? In short, was *Plato* really the dreamer of Socrates' dream?

'Plato, don't confine yourself to Socratic rationalism, to the *logos* as opposed to *mythos*. These are only apparent opposites, and *logos* is a mode of *mythos*. Plato, Plato! Wake up! Wake up and be a poet-philosopher! Practice *mousikê*!'

If Plato did dream such a dream, the fact would account for the anti-Socratic, poetic elements that infuse the best of his dialogues, the *Phaedo* for example. And it strikes me that the shadow of doubt cast over the dialogue's historicity by the frame conversation ['Plato, I think, was unwell'], and the repeated stress on *mythos* throughout—it strikes me that all this suggests that Plato may well have been the dreamer. If he wasn't, then I want to say at least that he interpreted Socrates' dream much differently than the dreamer did himself. The historical Socrates may have privileged *logoi* over *mythoi*, reason over creativity, but the Socrates of the *Phaedo*—which we suspect from the beginning of the work may be more Plato than Socrates—is a *mythologikos*, despite his protestation to the contrary. [Nietzsche also toyed with the idea that Plato's Socrates is more Plato than Socrates, as when he described him as 'Plato in front, Plato behind, and in the middle Chimera,' (BGE 190, alluding to *Iliad* 6.181).]

Let's sum up the spirit of the *Phaedo* this way: in and through the dialogue Plato turns Socrates against himself, turns him into his opposite, from the theoretical man into the artist—into himself, Plato. If this is right, then, as I said, *Plato is the musical Socrates*. And why not? It was Plato after all who erected a shrine to the Muses on the grounds of the Academy.

Tues, Jan 29

When Simmias and Cebes call on Socrates to account for his not resenting (*aganaktein*) dying, Socrates replies at length with what he terms a 'defense.' He hopes it will prove more successful than his defense before the jurors at trial. I

suppose success depends in this case on one's expectations. If a defense should provide more than a mere description of the defendant's peculiar perspective and psychology, if it should demonstrate the soundness of the assumptions that motivate his actions, then Socrates fails miserably. For his long defense amounts to little more than an analogy between the figurative separation (*apallagê*) of soul from body in the life and activities of the philosopher and the literal separation of soul from body at death.

Supposedly literal, I should say, since the claim that death is the separation of soul from body is merely stipulated, at 64c. [This is significant—as we'll see, Socrates relies throughout his discussion on the assumption that the soul is a substance in its own right independent of the body—which is not a minor detail to assume without argument!] The idea is that since Socrates thinks of philosophy as involving a sort of separation, and since death is separation, then it would be ridiculous (*geloion*) for him to resent the literal condition that he had been figuratively enacting as a philosopher. But of course the analogy is pertinent only if the figurative and literal forms of separation are relevantly similar. They're not.

The first of the three figurative instances of separation that Socrates relates—the philosopher's disdain and disregard for bodily pleasures and ornamentations (64c-65a)—is nothing like the literal separation of death; it is merely the fact that philosophers care little about their corporeal selves, that they tend toward asceticism.

The second instance of figurative separation involves the mode of the philosopher's approach to knowledge of the

Forms (65a-67b). Since truth is not accessible through the senses—even the poets insist on this—the soul in seeking the truth relies on itself alone (*autê kath' autên*), disregarding the deliverances of the senses, which tend only to confuse or mislead it. (Socrates calls this independence of the intellect from sensation 'purification,' which he associates with separation at 67a-d.) But this amounts to nothing more than the affirmation that conceptual reasoning is superior to empirical observation. And even if we grant that the senses play no role whatever in the acquisition of knowledge (and ignoring for now that this is inconsistent with the account at 74a-75c), this is still a thoroughly figurative sense of separation. Besides, the boldest claim that Socrates is entitled to derive from all this, as he himself admits, is that *either* knowledge is not possible at all, *or* it is possible only after death. Well, a skeptic might reply, perhaps knowledge isn't possible after all.

The third figurative instance of separation—regarding the philosopher's approach to virtue (68c-69c)—also bears no resemblance to death; it's the fact that philosophers ground virtue on wisdom (*phronêsis*) rather than on considerations of pleasure and pain. Following this claim, and by way of appeal to the Mysteries, Socrates likens the virtues to modes of purification (*katharmos*, 69b-d), which, as I just noted, he identifies with separation. But, again, this is separation as it is possible while alive—in a word, figurative separation.

And why, by the way, does Socrates say that those who founded the Mysteries were likely *speaking in riddles* when they said that the purified souls of the dead will dwell with

the gods (69c-d)—when this is precisely the claim that he himself has made about the soul (63b-c)? Is his own talk of purification, separation, and the soul after death dwelling with the gods a mystifying riddle? Does he not really mean it? Does Plato not?

Throughout his defense Socrates expresses hope that his soul will live after the death of his body. He says, for example, that he has good hope (*euelpis*) that something good awaits good men after death (63c), also that he has much hope (*pollê elpis*, 67b), and good hope (*meta agathês elpidos*, 67c), that he'll acquire knowledge after death. But Socrates' hopes are no substitute for arguments.

In the end, then, and to repeat: Socrates' defense comes down to this: 'Well, it would be ridiculous for someone who thinks of philosophy as I do to resent dying.' [Really, just compare 67d12-e2 to my paraphrase.]

For Socrates' defense to amount to more than an explanation of his own idiosyncratic motivation for not resenting death, it would have to demonstrate, first, that the soul really separates from the body at death, and, second, that this literal separation is relevantly similar to the living philosopher's figurative separation. Cebes recognizes at least the need to justify the first point, which motivates his request that Socrates prove—or at least persuade his interlocutors—that the soul doesn't just dissolve and blow away at death. If Socrates could convince them of this, he says, there would be much good hope (*pollê...elpis...kai kalê*) that the things he has said by way of his defense are true. Not confidence, mind you, just hope.

Th, Jan 31

That Nietzsche ends *The Gay Science* with reference to Socrates, and in particular with a staged confrontation between Socrates and Zarathustra on the field of their relation to the value of life, suggests a lens through which to read the first section of the book, on *the teachers of the purpose of existence*. The Persian Zoroaster would be one such teacher, Buddha and Jesus would be others. But in this connection Nietzsche often had Socrates in mind, especially the dying Socrates of the *Phaedo*.

The surface message of the *Phaedo* is that there is another world, another life, behind or beneath this world and life. Thus the dialogue precisely satisfies Nietzsche's description of an 'anti-natural' system founded on 'a second, different existence' which 'unhinges by means of [its] new mechanics the old, ordinary existence.' And in the *Phaedo* as in Nietzsche's account, this second world is depicted as first, as ontologically prior to the world of our experience, more valuable too. In this otherworld—this *Hinterwelt*—and indeed because of it, our present lives have meaning, purpose, and consequence. The eternal fate of our immortal souls is at stake. Thus Socrates says he was motivated to leave nothing undone in life, so far as he was able, but was eager in every way to make it to this otherworld after death with a pure soul (69c-d). This is serious; life is serious; philosophy as a way of life, as a purification, is serious indeed. As Nietzsche says, the 'ethical teacher' (read Socrates), the 'teacher of the purpose of existence,' strives to ensure that 'we do not *laugh* at existence...or at him.'

Simmias laughs at Socrates when he suggests that those who engage in philosophy properly (*orthôs*) practice nothing else but dying and being dead. His laughter in fact is stressed by three instances of *gelaô* in one sentence. In response to Simmias's laughter Socrates introduces the analogy on which his defense depends, namely the separation of soul from body in death and in the life of the philosopher, which we discussed on Tuesday. And when he concludes his defense, Simmias is silent. Presumably he now realizes the seriousness of our situation. The gods are watching.

Nietzsche foresees a day when we have deflated the solemn pretensions of *Phaedo*-Platonism, and every similar metaphysical-moral mode of seriousness, when we have finally realized that all that happens happens 'necessarily and always, spontaneously and without any purpose.' On that day we shall realize also that the species is all, the individual nothing. We shall comprehend the innocence of becoming. And the laughter welling up from these liberating insights will form an alliance with wisdom to produce *la gaya scienza*. The individual is not a center around which the cosmos revolves, his fate a focus of eternal judgement and consequence. The one is zero, innocent and unserious. In this case laughter is permitted, encouraged even. Laughter as a symptom of the great health.

Tues, Feb 5

In reply to Socrates' defense of his not resenting death, Cebes remarks that there's much mistrust (*pollên apistian*) among men about such talk regarding the soul as Socrates' claim that at death it separates from the body. Perhaps this

explains the fact—to which Socrates alludes at 70b-c—that the comic poets so delighted in provoking laughter at his prattling on about such matters, about things in the heavens and under the earth, the very subject of his *mythos-logos* in the *Phaedo*. In any case, Socrates replies to Cebes' concern with what we might call a defense of his defense. This consists of three arguments for the immortality of the soul, the first of which is the so-called argument from opposites.

It's at this point, by the way, as I noted a week or so ago, that Socrates asks whether they should *diamythologômen* (literally, 'mythologize about') these matters, specifically about whether the soul exists somewhere after death and possesses some power (*dunamis*) and intelligence (*phronêsis*).

The argument from opposites is inspired by a *palaios logos*, an ancient story, 'which we remember,' which presumably Socrates believes, and which if true justifies his expectation of life after death. According to this ancient *logos*, souls exist in the underworld, arriving there from here, and then they arrive back here again, coming to be from those who have died. If this is so, Socrates says, then our souls must exist in the underworld after death, which presumably implies that souls do indeed separate from bodies at death—if, that is, we should trust an ancient *logos* that amounts to nothing more than a pious old Pythagorean *mythos*.

The argument is simple, or at least it begins that way. All things which have opposites come to be from their opposites, the weaker from the stronger, for example, or the worse from the better. This makes perfect sense, of course, but when Socrates switches from comparative predi-

cates to states of being, one wonders whether the move is legitimate, truth-preserving, as the logicians say. The states of waking and sleeping, Socrates' first example of opposite states, do indeed come to be from each other, if not as obviously, and not in the same way as, the lesser degree of some variable property comes to be from a greater degree of it, and vice versa. But what about the states of living and being dead? Is each of these really the state of some existing thing? None of Socrates' other examples imply the non-existence of the bearer of the comparative predicate, or the thing in the state. A weaker man exists no less than a stronger man, a sleeping man no less than one awake. But does a dead man exist no less than a living man?

If we take the soul as the subject of these states, as 'alive' when joined with a body and 'dead' when separated from it (in accord with Socrates' stipulated definition of death), then, yes, there would indeed be a subject of the state *being dead*, namely the still existing soul. But to take Socrates' point this way would be to grant him here, as a premise of his argument, the very conclusion the argument is supposed to establish. In short, one wonders whether Socrates' talk of living and being dead as states doesn't beg the question. *Is* there a thing (the soul) which is the subject of the state *being dead* (but yet exists)? That's the question at issue.

Th, Feb 7

Today's section of the *Phaedo* provides a detailed account of the doctrine that learning is recollection. Supplemented with the parallel section in the *Meno* (to which Cebes

probably refers at 73a-b), it's as thorough an account as one will find of most any doctrine in the dialogues. But is there an argument here for the immortality of the soul? There is not. As Socrates himself remarks at the conclusion of this section (76d-e), if the Forms exist, the soul must be immortal. If they don't exist, then the *logos* he's provided has been spoken in vain (*allôs ... eirêmenos*). But he doesn't even attempt to prove the relevant antecedent. Everyone he's speaking with simply assumes the existence of 'these realities,' the Forms. Moreover, Socrates hasn't quite stated the conditional correctly. It isn't true that there's an 'equal necessity' that the Forms exist and that our souls exist before birth. There could well be Forms but no soul. One must assume, not just Forms, but the doctrine that learning is recollection. The doctrine, if true, would necessitate both the Forms and pre-existent souls. But nothing in the *Phaedo* proves any of this.

What should we make of the total absence of an argument here? Has Plato compelled his Socrates to admit the groundlessness of his belief in Forms to cast doubt on the relevant metaphysics, and thereby also the immortality of the soul? Later, as we'll see, he appeals again to Forms to justify belief in an immortal soul, but there too he simply, and quite explicitly, hypothesizes Forms, with no argument whatever. It must be relevant that Plato doesn't just provide the semblance of arguments, but also makes a point of employing his characters to imply or state outright that the apparent proofs are insufficient or incomplete.

And as for the so-called affinity argument—the third of Socrates' 'proofs' of the immortality of the soul—it's not

even really an argument. It's a charm sung to soothe childish fears (77d-78a). And another analogy. And proceeding again on the assumption that immaterial souls exist. The bald assumption: 'The soul, as we conceive it, is immaterial, like the Forms. And therefore like the Forms it has no parts. But that which is non-composite cannot be dissolved. Therefore the soul is altogether indissoluble, which is to say immortal.' This is my paraphrase, but the 'as we conceive it' faithfully depicts the fact that Socrates assumes not only the existence of the soul but specific details about its nature to conclude that it's immortal.

Actually, Socrates concludes that the soul is altogether indissoluble, 'or something close to this' (*hê engus ti toutou*, 80b10). A surprising qualification. So the soul is only *mostly* indissoluble? Most of the soul but not all of it? Or for most of time but not forever? Or, what? Is this an indirect admission that the argument doesn't amount to a proof—which would at least be honest since it's hardly even an argument. A chain of inferences, no doubt; but not a proof. Rather an elaboration of the implications of various dubious hypotheses.

Tues, Feb 12

More notable than the three so-called arguments considered so far is the introduction in the section following the affinity argument of the theme of reincarnation and several formulations that are generally taken to imply the possibility of a permanent escape from the cycle of rebirth. But despite near universal scholarly agreement, the consensus on this point is mistaken: the *Phaedo* does *not* teach escape from the

cycle of rebirth. It's true that nothing in the text explicitly rules it out—but why would it? The idea never even comes up, so there's no call to argue against it. Moreover, nothing said in the text implies it, much less states it outright. The doctrine simply isn't there. There's just no definitive—nor even any *nearly* definitive—evidence for it in the text.

This is central to our exploration of the *Phaedo*, and indeed of Plato's intentions as an author, a philosophical author. It's pertinent also to an evaluation of Nietzsche's reading of the *Phaedo*. So, although it requires inspecting many details at length, I gather here in one place each and every one of the relevant passages.

The *locus classicus* is 114c, at the conclusion of Socrates' description of the underworld and the afterlife, and just prior to his drinking of the hemlock. [I'm jumping ahead now to the end of the work, to cover the most important passage first. Later I'll back up to examine the others in the order they appear in the text.] Socrates says that 'those who have purified themselves sufficiently by way of philosophy live without bodies in the future, and they come to dwellings still more beautiful that these [discussed previously in the myth], which it's not easy to describe, nor is there sufficient time at present [to do so]' (114c2-6).

Does this passage imply the possibility of full and final escape from the body? It's not clear that it does, not unless one is specifically searching the text for the doctrine.

Socrates says that those who have been sufficiently purified by philosophy will live without a body in the future, *eis ton epeita chronon*. But there's nothing in this expression that necessitates that we take it to mean *eternally*. It may

suggest only that the soul after death will live without a body throughout the ensuing postmortem state, until it's reborn. The expression *ho epeita chronos* appears elsewhere in Plato, but nowhere does it unambiguously indicate literal eternity: At Phdr 244e, Symp 208e, and Tim 90d the meaning is ambiguous between 'in the future' and 'eternally'; at Rep 357b, Phdr 240e and 257d, Symp 200d (x3), Menex 241c-d, and Leg 656e, 688d, 704a, 741c, and 754d it definitely does *not* mean 'eternally.'

But maybe there's a way to defend the reading of 'eternally' here. The *eis ton epeita chronon* is immediately preceded by *to parapan* (altogether, absolutely), so if we take the two together then we might have reason to read the whole as 'altogether in future time,' or 'in eternity.' But in context it's ambiguous whether *to parapan* modifies *eis ton epeita chronon* or the preceding claim that after death souls will live without a body, *aneu...sômatôn zôsi*. If the latter is the correct reading, then Socrates' claim is that the soul of the purified philosopher will live after death *altogether without a body*.

How then should we take the *to parapan*, as modifying the temporal clause or the bodiless clause? Plato doesn't modify any such temporal expression with *to parapan* anywhere in the early or middle dialogues. Surely this must weaken the case for this reading—especially since he *does* elsewhere employ the expression in a manner consistent with the use we're considering here, placement after a verb to modify a predicate preceding the verb. There's an example even in the *Phaedo* (at 89e2-3). Therefore, we can be certain that

aneu...sômatôn zôsi to parapan is a perfectly grammatical, natural, and even Platonic, reading.

That the expression is not only grammatical but sensible, and even consistent with the substance of the dialogue, is evident given that earlier (at 81c and 83d) Socrates speaks of the impure soul as being mixed up with corporeality (*dieilêmmenên...hupo tou sômatoeidous*), earthy (*geôdes*), corporeal (*sômatoeidê*), and quite full of (or infected with: *anaplea*) the body. Read against this background, Socrates at 114c would be stressing that the thoroughly purified soul will depart from the body at death taking no corporeal admixture with it. In short, that it will live in the future *altogether without a body*. But, again, the future at issue may well be finite, enduring only until the soul's rebirth into another body. [I omitted the 'altogether' from my translation of the passage above so as not to imply one or the other reading.]

As for the other passages that may be taken to imply escape from the cycle of rebirth, they are all more ambiguous than 114c. Let's consider them in order.

In the course of his 'defense,' when discussing purification as involving separation (*to chôrizein*) of soul from body, Socrates refers to the soul's gathering itself together with itself (*autên kath' autên*) and, having been released (*ekluomenên*) from the bonds of the body, dwelling (*oikein*) alone with itself in the future (67c-d). This is the first passage in the text that a reader in search of the doctrine of permanent escape might identify as implying it. In itself, however, it isn't at all obvious that this is the point. The soul dwells alone in the future—this could imply any

number of facts about the state of the soul in the underworld prior to its rebirth. It certainly doesn't demand to be read as implying an eternal future.

As to eternity, we can massage the passage by associating it with 114c as follows: when Socrates says that the soul can live separately from the body not just now (*en tôi nun paronti*) but in the future (*en tôi epeita* [*chronôi*]), we may urge that this prefigures the *eis ton epeita chronon* at 114c, and also that the *oikein* ('to dwell') prefigures the *oikêseis* ('dwellings') at 114c. But this requires that we read quite a bit of extra material into the passage as it stands, and besides, since the passage at 114c is itself ambiguous, it won't serve to disambiguate any other passage.

The second passage one might take as suggesting the possibility of permanent escape from the cycle of rebirth appears at 69c where, at the conclusion of his defense, Socrates says that he has confidence that after death he will 'dwell with the gods' (*meta theôn oikêsei*). But that's it; that's all it says. Obviously, one has to read much into this passage to derive permanent escape from it. One could, for example, associate the *oikêsei* with the *oikêseis* at 114c, but this is a weaker association even than the previous example, which at least made reference to 'the future.' Besides, Socrates says that this way of describing the postmortem fate of the soul is a riddling way of putting the matter, as in the Mysteries. So who really knows what he has in mind here?

We hear nothing else of anything like the possibility of escape from the cycle of rebirth until after the affinity argument. Then Socrates says that the soul that has practiced philosophy properly, as training for death, will go away to

that which is of the same kind (*to homoion*)—divine, deathless, and wise—and, arriving there (*aphikomenêi*) and escaping human ills (*kakôn tôn anthrôpeiôn apêllagmenêi*), it will live in the future with the gods (*ton loipon chronon meta theôn diagousa*) (81a). As in the previous example, Socrates here refers to this way of putting the matter as relating to the Mysteries, which is to say, presumably, it's a riddling formulation. And anyway there's nothing in the passage to necessitate that his reference to the future implies eternity. The expression *ho loipos chronos* may be taken to mean 'eternally' at Ap 41c, but it most definitely does *not* mean this at *Meno* 81b (quoting Pindar), Rep 460a, Menex 246b, or Leg 840d, 929e, or 954d.

Immediately following this passage here at 81a, Socrates discusses reincarnation into animals, including the human animal, and in this connection he says that no one but the absolutely purified philosopher may approach or attain the race of the gods (*eis...theôn genos...aphikneisthai*) (82b-c). Now, one might argue that since Socrates mentions reincarnation into the human form here, he means to imply that the purified philosopher will not even be subject to later embodiment as a human. But his point in this passage is not about the human in general, but rather about a particular type of human—moderate souls will be reincarnated as moderate humans. Nothing in the passage suggests that this exhausts the possibilities of re-embodiment as a human. Moreover, given that this formulation shares with those at 69c and 81a talk of being with the gods, it might well be yet another riddling articulation of the matter as promulgated in the Mysteries [in fact it's *probable* that it

is, because this passage is more or less continuous with the 81a passage].

The images of imprisonment and liberation following this section on reincarnation—especially Socrates' saying at 84a2-5 that the soul of the philosopher would not think that after philosophy has freed it, it should give itself over to pleasures and pains and thereby 'bind itself fast again' (*heautên palin au egkatadein*)—these images might suggest to a careless reader that the properly purified soul can avoid being bound fast again in a new life after its liberation from the body at death. But in fact the liberation and imprisonment at issue here (from 82d through 84b) are all of the figurative variety we discussed a couple of weeks ago. The 'liberation' is the living soul's 'separation' from the body in its search for knowledge, which is to say the living philosopher's exercise of reason without relying on the senses. Imprisonment is soul's believing that truth is what the body (i.e., the senses) says it is (as at 83d6). Moreover, at the conclusion of this section Socrates insists, not that the soul of the philosopher who lives rightly will escape the body never to be reborn, but only that it will not scatter in the wind and dissolve.

In the middle of this section on imprisonment and liberation Socrates contends [or seems to contend—I'll explain the 'seems to' shortly] that the soul's being reincarnated (*palin piptein eis allo sôma*: lit, to fall back into another body) is the greatest and most extreme of all bad things (*pantôn megiston te kakôn kai eschaton*, 83c2-3), the problem being that the re-embodied soul has no share in intercourse with the divine, pure, and single-formed (83e-84a). This

section concludes with mention of the pure soul after death approaching or attaining (*eis...aphikomenê*) that which is akin (*to suggenes*) to the true and divine (*to alêthes kai to theion*) after having escaped from human ills (*apêllachthai tôn anthrôpinôn kakôn*) (84b). If reincarnation is the worst thing possible, then unless we humans are condemned to suffering terribly forever, there must be some way to escape the cycle.

So it might seem—if, that is, we haven't read the relevant passage carefully. Notice that it's not reincarnation in and of itself that Socrates identifies as the terrible thing at issue, with the negative implication that those who avoid this terrible thing are never reincarnated. The terrible thing is rather being reincarnated *quickly* (***tachu*** *palin piptein eis allo sôma*, 83d10-e1), without the opportunity to spend time among the divine. [Cebes affirms this point with the superlative response formula *alêthestata...legeis* (83e4), one of only three instances of his using this formula in the work.] Why this is terrible is evident when we consider it together with the immediately preceding section on reincarnation into different kinds of animals. The problem is that the all-too-quickly reincarnated soul will fail to acquire the knowledge (through commune with the Forms) sufficient to ensure a desirable future incarnation.

That quick reincarnation, rather than reincarnation in itself, is really what's at issue here is supported by the *Phaedrus* [if we may interpret one dialogue by way of another, which is not uncontroversial]. In the *Phaedrus* some souls after death have no view of the truth beyond the rim of heaven; they are 'uninitiated' (*ateleis*, 248b4), and they do

not spend time with the gods (248c). This is reminiscent of the description in the *Phaedo* of those who die unpurified and so do not dwell with the gods as 'uninitiated' (*atelestos*, 69c5). And in the *Phaedrus* even those souls that do accompany a god and see something of the truth, souls that are described as initiates (249c6-8)—*even these souls are reincarnated* (249a-b), even they become heavy (*barunthêi*, *baruntheisa*: 248c) and fall (*pesêi*: 248c, *pesousai*: 250a) to earth, precisely as the 'earthy' souls in the *Phaedo* are heavy (*baru*, *barunetai*: 81c) and not long (*tachu*) after death fall (*piptein*: 83d) into another bodily incarnation. Therefore, if we may appeal to the *Phaedrus* for assistance interpreting the scheme of reincarnation in the *Phaedo*, we may equate the souls in the former work who fail to attend a god and so see nothing of the truth with those in the latter who are reincarnated quickly and so have no intercourse with the gods. And, more significantly, we may equate those souls in the *Phaedrus* who, despite being initiates who keep company with the gods, nevertheless eventually become heavy and fall to earth to be reincarnated, with those in the *Phaedo* who practice philosophy correctly but who, we may infer, are not permanently released from the cycle of rebirth but are eventually reborn.

So, there we have every passage in the *Phaedo* into which one might read the doctrine of permanent escape from the cycle of rebirth. These accounts share a common vocabulary of *escape from the body* and from *human ills* and of *arrival* in the realm of *the gods* or *the divine*, to which the *purified soul* is *akin* and where it will *live in the future*. But does all this

amount to escape from the cycle of rebirth? It's not obvious that it does. Not at all.

If Plato means to affirm the possibility of a final and permanent escape from the cycle of rebirth, one wonders why he nowhere indicates this explicitly. We have just examined every passage that may be taken to imply it, but in none is the idea stressed or even stated unambiguously. Socrates never isolates, identifies, emphasizes, and explains the idea in full. Nor do his interlocutors enquire about it; they seek no clarification, expansion, or proof of it. It's as if to them it isn't even implied. There's certainly no reason to believe that no one mentions it explicitly because everyone simply takes it for granted, as obvious. Escape from the cycle of rebirth was not a standard teaching, not in general at the time nor in Plato's dialogues. If Plato meant to teach it, then, one would expect something more to be made of it. That nothing much is made of it—and that *nothing at all* is made of it without deep (I might even say *fatal*) ambiguities—this makes me suspect that it isn't really there.

[Radcliffe Edmonds is dubious of the idea that any Greek of Plato's day conceived the possibility of escape from the cycle of rebirth. See his *Myths of the Underworld Journey*, also the chapter 'Life in the afterlife' of his *Redefining Ancient Orphism*.]

Th, Feb 14

The bulk of the *Phaedo* we've covered so far is Socrates' defense of his defense for not resenting dying by way of demonstrating that something good happens to good men at death. Or, if not quite demonstrating, then providing good

hope of this. Socrates can't really claim to have demonstrated anything at this point because each of his three arguments simply assumes the existence of the soul as a separate, or separable, substance that escapes the body at death and which gathers itself together with itself. Socrates helps himself to this account from his stipulated definition of death (at 64c), which includes escape (*apallagê*), separation (*chôris*), and the soul's being gathered together with itself (*autên kath' autên*). Even Cebes, whose doubts about the soul's continued existence after death motivate Socrates' three arguments, assumes that the soul escapes the body at death (*apallagêi tou sômatos*, 70a2); he wonders only whether it does in fact gather itself together with itself (*autê kath' autên sunêthroismenê*), exist somewhere, and have 'some power and intelligence' (70a-b).

Perhaps the lack of substantive argumentation—to say nothing of *proof*—explains Socrates' admission following the affinity argument that his reasoning throughout the dialogue so far is insufficient. There remain, he says, many suspicions and vulnerable points (*pollas...hupopsias kai antilabas*) in what has been said (84c); and he invites Simmias and Cebes, who are evidently still puzzled (*aporeiton*, the verb is cognate with *aporia*), to indicate anything that seems to them to have been said inadequately (*endeôs*). And although this admission follows most closely on the affinity argument, we may take it to apply to each of the three previous arguments, since Socrates' conclusion (at 84b) that one need not fear that upon separation the soul will fly off and go away and be nothing anywhere any longer is an almost word for word repetition of the terms employed by Cebes

when (at 70a) he objected to Socrates' defense on the grounds that men doubt whether the soul exists after death, which prompted Socrates to offer his three arguments. In short, here (at 84b) ends (the first phase of) Socrates' defense of his defense, begun way back at 70b, and upon concluding he acknowledges that his arguments are still radically insufficient (I take the 'radically' from his admitting to 'many' vulnerabilities).

Tues, Feb 19

In GS 110 Nietzsche writes of what he calls 'life-preserving errors,' the errors of 'things, substances, bodies,' for example. In a word, the error of *being*. Passed down through the gene pool, and also by way of education, these errors are 'incorporated' into the organism, integrated into the perceptual and cognitive systems of the human animal, whereby eventually they come to constitute 'knowledge' and, as an assemblage of natural inclinations and intellectual assumptions, they function as the standard for establishing knowledge in the future. They regulate our experience of the real, determine what counts as a fact. In short, they disclose the world to us—but *it's a world of their construction*. It's a *fabricated reality*. Thus our truths are grounded on, literally constituted by, fictions.

These errors are at work in Platonism (not to say in Plato), especially in the naive trust in, first, the deliverances of the senses (despite the constant railing against the senses as unreliable and immoral—I'll come back to this), and, second, the concept-formation and reasoning powers of the brain. From this trust grow the 'erroneous articles of faith'

(in *being*, in all its manifestations—atom, substance, soul, Form, God), as Nietzsche calls them. Among the ancients the human nervous system had yet to become aware of itself, suspicious of itself. Hence their naivety.

But if no part of the human has not become, if there's no mind or soul independent of, uninfluenced by, the flux of becoming, then there's no guarantee that our sensory-cognitive apparatus tracks anything other than the 'truths' of experience, no guarantee that these 'truths' are true. Life-preserving, yes, but since what's selected for in evolution is success in action, not truth of belief, and since even false beliefs can motivate successful action (i.e., action tending to promote survival and reproduction), survival is no proof of truth. Nietzsche understood this, insisted on it even: 'Life is no argument,' he wrote. 'The conditions of life might include error' (GS 121; compare WP 483, 493). Indeed, untruth is a condition of life, specifically untruth as manifested in those synthetic *a priori* judgments which, according to Kant, are generative of this world of things (in Nietzschean terms, the fiction of enduring things—see BGE 4).

[All of this relates to N's falsificationism, which we discussed a few weeks back. The classic case *against* reading N as a falsificationist in his later period is Clark's *N on Phil and Truth*. Her argument is sufficiently rebutted by Lanier Anderson's review in *Nietzsche-Studien*. Also very good on this topic is Stack's *N's Anthropic Circle*. And maybe it's worth noting here Berry's book on N and ancient skepticism. She takes her case too far, I think. But that's all right. That's just another way of saying that I'm not her.]

So when I speak of the Platonic trust in the senses, I mean to call attention to the fact that one reasons to the Forms by way of taking the world seriously as it presents itself to us, as when in the *Phaedo* one's experience of two sticks launches one on the intellectual path leading eventually to 'insight' into the Form of *equality* (73c-77a: at 74c7-9 Socrates *stresses* that we 'conceive and grasp knowledge of' the Form of *equality* by way of equal particulars, to which Simmias replies with the superlative response formula, *alêthestata*, 'most truly'). But if the world as we experience it—the world of enduring substances, of general natural kinds, etc.—if this world is a phantasm generated by our nervous system as it developed under various survival pressures, then we have reason to be suspicious of the 'truths' we identify in and through it, and even more suspicious of any metaphysical superstructures raised on it as a foundation. Thus Nietzsche himself identifies the belief 'that there are equal things' as one of the erroneous articles of faith at the roots of our 'knowledge.'

Nietzsche traces the error of *being* back to Parmenides, to whose students and followers, the Eleatics, he attributes the invention of the image of the *sage* as one who embodies, intellectually and psychologically, the characteristics of the One (unchanging, impersonal, impassive). He is *being* manifest as man, the light of heaven dwelling on earth. Our own conception of the sage as quiet and serene, still and at peace with himself and the world, with the cosmos even—our notion of the sage descends from the Eleatics and their *being* and their One. But *being* is a fiction, from matter to substance to things to God to the Eleatics' One itself.

Therefore our paradigmatic image of the serious and unperturbable sage is misleading.

For Nietzsche, the man in whom the conflict between the ancient errors of *being* and the insight that *there is only becoming* plays out as an internal intellectual struggle—this man is the 'thinker.' And of course this thinker is the philosopher, the philosopher-artist in the Nietzschean mode. One lesson then of GS 110 is that the philosopher, who revels in the conflict between *being* and *becoming*, who engages in skeptical, innocent, honest, and cheerful intellectual play, and who does all this even as an experiment with life—let's call him a friend of thinking—this type is superior to the sage.

Th, Feb 21

Taking up Socrates' invitation to speak up if he's unsatisfied with the progress of the conversation so far, Simmias proposes an account of the soul as a harmony or attunement of the parts of the body which, if true, would undermine the stipulated separate existence of soul—'soul' would be just a word to designate the fact that the parts and powers of the body function properly together; to think of it as a substance in itself would be a category mistake, as the analytic philosophers like to say.

Socrates meets Simmias's challenge by replying that his soul-as-attunement account is inconsistent with learning as recollection; that if true it would be impossible to understand ignorance or vice in the soul; and that unlike the relation of attunement to an instrument (the attunement exists only through the condition of the instrument, not the

other way around), the soul directs and at times even opposes the body.

However successful these remarks may be as objections to Simmias's proposal, they do nothing to prove the still unsupported claim that the soul is separable from the body, much less that it's immortal. Even the last point, which might seem to imply a power distinct from the body, suggests only that something appears sometimes to act contrary to some of the body's impulses, which of course in any particular instance might itself be some other part, aspect, or power of the body. In any case, the point does not demonstrate the existence of soul as a distinct substance.

For all the consternation Simmias's and Cebes' counter-arguments caused among Socrates' interlocutors—and even Echecrates declares himself affected—Socrates easily disposes of Simmias's concerns. Cebes' will be more difficult. But we'll get to that. For now I remark on Socrates' urging his friends, despite the difficulties they're encountering in the arguments, not to succumb to misology. There's no greater bad thing one can suffer, he says, than to mistrust *logos* (*ouk estin...hoti an tis meizon toutou kakon pathoi*, 89d2-3). This is a surprising claim, for recall that previously Socrates insisted that being reincarnated without ample time among the gods is the greatest and most extreme of all bad things (*pantôn megiston te kakôn kai eschaton*, 83c2-3).

It's surprising also because it's incongruous with the surrounding content of the dialogue. There's an undercurrent of rebuke in Socrates' warning against misology, as if Simmias and Cebes—and Echecrates and Phaedo too—are at fault, or at risk of being at fault, for their doubts about

his reasoning. It might well be a pity to mistrust *logos* if there really is a 'true and certain' argument through which we can acquire 'truth and knowledge of the real,' but Socrates hasn't so far provided any reason to think this likely. He himself has admitted to the gaps and flaws in his reasoning. And the major argument to which all this is preliminary material (his long reply to Cebes' objection) is no better. As we'll see next week, it's utterly dependent on admittedly unproven hypotheses.

Socrates concludes this section by remarking that if what he says (about the immortality of the soul) happens to be true, then it would be admirable (*kalôs*) to believe. Really? Good to believe on the basis of unsound arguments, on insufficient evidence, and on the subjectively determined plausibility of hypotheses and the internal coherence of their apparent implications, because, well, after all, the unsubstantiated conclusion might just *happen* (*tugchanei*) to be true? I'm no evidentialist myself—but that's a matter for another day—but Socrates' position here is far from measuring up to the man's reputation as a 'mystogogue of science,' to employ Nietzsche's formulation. And his remark that even if what he says isn't true, believing it will at least give him peace in the face of death—well, here he admits that his arguments don't really settle anything about the truth of the matter.

If this is the best *logos* can do, or that Socrates can do with *logos*, then I would be reluctant to rebuke any serious thinker who mistrusts it. Could it be that Plato was such a one? The more I read the *Phaedo*, the more I think this might be so. Nothing in the dialogue quite makes sense—not

anyway if we mistake it for a straightforward work of what we've been taught to call philosophy.

Tues, Feb 26

Plato can do many things at once, and no doubt he's doing many things in the section recounting Socrates' intellectual biography. Whether this really is Socrates' biography, or Plato's autobiography, or something else altogether—a fiction or semi-fiction—is impossible to determine. Fortunately, this question doesn't concern us. I'm interested in the role this section plays in Socrates' reply to Cebes' complaint that so far he's demonstrated only that the soul is long lasting, but not that it's literally immortal. To make his case for immortality, Socrates will hypothesize the existence of Forms. In this section (95a-107a) he explains his reasons for adopting this approach, develops two different versions of the theory of Forms, and then employs the second version to complete his proof.

I've noted many times by now that Socrates hasn't even attempted to prove the reality of soul as a substance distinct and separable from body. He stipulated this account of soul in his definition of death and he has assumed it throughout. At the end of this section he finally derives soul from other propositions, but it's a dubious derivation—I think of it less as a derivation than a conjuring trick—and anyway it depends utterly on the real existence of Forms, which he stipulates as baldly as earlier he stipulated soul as a separate substance. In the end, then, Socrates shows only that the presumption of soul appears to be consistent with some

other ideas taken in a particular way. But he hasn't shown that any of this is true.

Socrates begins by explaining why he abandoned his youthful passion for investigating the causes of things by way of that *sophia* which people call the inquiry into nature (*peri phuseôs historian*). Instead of observing the things themselves, he says, he now takes refuge in (*kataphugonta*: lit, he flees down into) *logoi* (96a-100a). What this means is none too clear, but at a minimum it means, as Socrates explains, that when thinking about cause and everything else, he hypothesizes the *logos* which he judges most formidable (*errômenestaton*, which has the primary meaning of physical vigor), and he postulates as true those things that harmonize with it. We might say he trusts the judgment of his subjectivity as to what's plausible and then investigates the implications. In the present context he proposes to hypothesize Forms, and if Cebes will grant him these, and concede that they exist, he hopes to demonstrate that the soul is immortal (100a-b). Cebes for his part does not hesitate to grant Socrates his hypothesis.

Yet despite securing Cebes' agreement, Socrates again explains his resorting to hypotheses and says, in effect, that he will not entertain any objections to the existence of Forms—that would necessitate an altogether different conversation (101c-e). But Socrates' determination simply to hypothesize Forms doesn't worry his interlocutors at all. In fact, they're so satisfied with his methodology that they simultaneously reply with the enthusiastically affirmative response formula, 'You speak most truly' (*alethestata... legeis*, 102a2: this is the only instance in the dialogue of both

Simmias and Cebes employing this superlative response formula to one and the same idea). And here too Phaedo and Echecrates reappear to approve Socrates' method, with Phaedo particularly stressing that the reality of Forms was conceded and agreed to (102a10-b2).

All this is to say that Plato has made a point of stressing that Socrates offers no demonstration whatever of the foundational premise of his argument. Evidently he intends to focus his reader's mind on what Socrates is up to here, namely, he has secured his interlocutors' permission to assume the reality of Forms and so to ground his final 'proof' on an utterly unsubstantiated proposition.

We need not dwell on the details of Socrates' demonstration. Suffice it to say that, according to Socrates' original theory of Forms (which at 105b-c he calls safe but ignorant [*amathê*]), the presence of (the Form of) *life* in a thing would cause it to be alive, but on his modified theory (also safe, but more refined or ingenious—*kompsoteran*), *life* is something like an essential property of soul, and soul is that which when present in a body causes it to be alive. In short, from his 'other safe' version of the theory of Forms Socrates conjures soul as something like a vehicle for, or carrier of, *life*. He then argues that since life is an essential property of soul, soul will never admit the presence of the opposite of life, namely death. Therefore, the soul is deathless, and since the deathless is also indestructible, the soul will not dissolve and disperse when the body dies. Therefore, Socrates concludes, our souls after death really will be in Hades (*tôi onti esontai hêmôn hai psychai en Haidou*, 107a1).

This last formulation recalls the beginning of Socrates' defense of his defense, which commenced after Cebes remarked that his defense might be persuasive if our souls endure after the death of the body (see in particular the formulation, *en Haidou eisin hai psychai*) (70a-c).

Cebes is convinced by Socrates' argument. Simmias for his part says that he has no way to dispute the *logos*, but he adds that he does retain some doubt (*apsitia*) given the magnitude of the subject and his disdain for human weakness.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Socrates not only affirms Simmias's skeptical reservations, he even adds that the first hypotheses of his argument (i.e., Forms) must be investigated further, even if they find them credible. Not on this day, but in general, for all these arguments amount to nothing if the hypothesis on which they're based is false. So it seems that even Socrates understands that he hasn't really demonstrated anything beyond the apparent consistency of a set of propositions. Whether the propositions, besides being mutually consistent, are true—this is another question, and to answer it would require, at least, a demonstration of the reality of Forms. And it's not even clear that Socrates thinks there's any such demonstration available. It may be that the most we can hope to do is follow the *logos* as thoroughly as it's possible for a human to follow it. Beyond this, he says, there is nothing to be sought (107b).

In sum, then, Socrates' final argument for the immortality of soul simply hypothesizes Forms, then conjures soul from Forms plus the 'other safe answer,' namely that soul is a vehicle for (the Form of) *life* rather than just *life* alone

being that which when present in a body makes it living. Nothing else about the soul has been demonstrated; not even, for example, that it is conscious. To secure the soul as intelligent and moral requires, at least, recollection and virtue-as-purification and/or reincarnation, both of which are simply assumed throughout (so it's not just the bare existence of Forms that Socrates hypothesizes, but much else besides). In short, the entire edifice is built on unproven hypotheses. Perhaps this is why the defense of Socrates' defense amounts in the end to a *mythos*.

Th, Feb 28

There's no need to examine the details of Socrates' account of the afterlife, the underworld, and the true earth. Not for our purposes anyway. But there are some elements of this section that are relevant to our investigations. [The chapters on the *Phaedo* myth in Kingsley's *Ancient Phil, Mystery, and Magic* are well worth reading for detailed information on all this.]

Notice that Socrates' account of the fate of the soul immediately after death—its being met by a *daimôn* and led into the underworld—is based on what 'is said' (*legetai*) and on popular 'rituals and customs.' Then, when he speaks of the shape of the earth, he stresses (four times) that he's been 'persuaded by someone' of the information. And later he introduces his account of 'the realities on the earth under heaven'—which includes the judgment and rewards and punishments of souls—by saying that he will *mython legein*, or speak a myth (110b1), to which Simmias replies that they

will gladly hear 'this myth' (110b3-4). Finally, when Socrates concludes, he remarks (and here I translate quite literally), 'To confidently affirm that these things are as I have recounted is not fitting for a man with an intellect' (114d1-2), then he repeats his description of these things as a *mythos* (114d7).

So what are we left with in the end? Not certainty, that's for sure. Not even probability. It seems there's only the great hope which Socrates mentions at the conclusion of his myth (*hê elpis megalê*, 114c9). That's a meager result for so long a conversation. Perhaps that's why, after admitting that no man of intellect would insist on the accuracy of what he's said, Socrates obfuscates with the following convoluted sentence: 'That these things [I've just gone through] are so, or that some such things about our souls and [their] dwellings [are so], since really the soul appears to be immortal, this, it seems to me, is both fitting and worth the risk to one thinking it to be this way—for the risk is noble—and it is necessary that he sing such things to himself as an incantation' (114d2-7).

The soul *appears* to be immortal, he says. That's a feeble claim. And yet, weak as it is, it's still too bold for what the *logos* has actually come to. Does Socrates imagine that his lengthy intervening *mythos* about the underworld has made everyone forget that he himself acknowledged (at 107b) that their 'first hypotheses, even if they're credible to us, should be examined more distinctly'? That's quite a lot remaining to examine. I suppose that until we've managed that, all we have really *is* just an incantation.

So, we've seen that Socrates doesn't prove the immortality of the soul, much less any of his other assertions about its nature, either in this or in the supposed next life. If we don't believe anteriorly in Forms, and various associated dogma (like the idea that learning is recollection), then Socrates hasn't rendered any of his claims even probable. It's all a *mythos*, a charm (recall 77d-78a), a raft on which to sail through the dangers of life (85c-d), or the prophetic vapors of a doomed man who fancies himself a co-servant with the swans of Apollo (84d-85b).

As I've said before, one wonders what's really going on here. Put it this way: why exactly did Plato write this dialogue? Apparently not to prove that the soul is immortal. Not only does he not prove this, everyone involved in the conversation is well aware that Socrates hasn't completed a proof—not least because he himself points this out, insists on it even. The arguments throughout are weak, and their flaws are noted either by Simmias and Cebes or by Socrates himself. The gravest problem with much of the *logos* is that it simply stipulates the existence of a separable soul. And when Socrates delivers his final argument, through which he finally derives the soul's existence as a substance independent of the body, he does so by way of yet another stipulation, namely Forms, and a particular variation on the operation of Forms (the 'other safe' version of his theory). It's a conjuring trick. Really, just as he conjures soul from the need to have a vehicle to carry (the Form of) *life* into the body, so he conjures his doctrine worth the risk of believing from a hodgepodge of myths and dubious arguments.

But to return to my question. Why did Plato write this dialogue? Why compose such a long and intricate work that, considered solely with respect to its central *logos*, takes something like the following form: 'This fictional character persuades these other fictional characters to accept claims, or to be comforted by claims, or at least to stop objecting to claims, which they all admit to be unjustified, or to be justified only on the assumption of a doctrine, and several other attendant claims, which none of these fictional characters provide either themselves or you, reader, any good reason to believe.'

I won't try to answer this question in full. But I will say again that it seems to me that Plato did *not* write the *Phaedo* to prove that the soul is immortal. Nor even to offer us readers consolation when confronted by death in our own lives. Really, where's the consolation in an unsubstantiated doctrine which can be commended solely on the grounds that to believe it is a noble risk?

Tues, March 5

Recall Nietzsche's account of the dying Socrates in *The Birth of Tragedy* as the paradigmatic theoretical man, the optimistic dialectician tranquil in the face of death. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche stresses instead the significance of Socrates' last words, which he interprets as a condemnation of life. Socrates' obligation to sacrifice to Asclepius, the god of healing, suggests to Nietzsche that Socrates regarded his life as a sickness, for which death was the cure. Socrates suffered from life, and despite his apparently cheerful demeanor, he had in fact been a pessimist.

Nietzsche makes the same point in *Twilight of the Idols*, adding that Socrates' 'weariness of life,' even 'resistance to life,' is evidence of Socrates' decadence. Socrates—and Plato too—were 'pseudo-Greek, anti-Greek.'

Socrates may well have been decadent, and Nietzsche provides many reasons to affirm this—for example, the 'anarchy of his instincts' and the 'hypertrophy of [his] logical faculty' (this from TI); but if the *Phaedo* doesn't really teach the possibility of escape from the cycle of rebirth, then we can't count this as one among his legitimate indictments of the man. (At 95c-d Socrates seems to imply that embodied life is *not* a sickness—see specifically the *nosos* at 95d2.) Rather, we should stress Socrates' status as the 'mystagogue of science' who privileged soul over body, reason over instinct, Apollo over Dionysus. We could add 'radical ascetic,' though from the totality of evidence it's not clear whether this is a fair description of Socrates the man or only of the character in the *Phaedo*.

In any case, even if we join Nietzsche in condemning Socrates on these grounds, I'm confident that we can't include Plato in the indictment. Let's agree that Socrates exaggerated the power and significance of *logos*. Fine. But we can't say the same about Plato, and it seems to me that the *Phaedo* itself provides ample evidence of this. At every turn the *logos* is subverted by, diverted toward, or transformed into *mythos*. And taking the dialogue as a whole, the *logos* (such as it is) is but one element of a broader *mythos*. And of course we can't—we *shouldn't*—forget that Plato himself has staged all this. Plato the philosopher-artist. Plato who, to remind you, Nietzsche once wrote, *used*

Socrates as an 'audacious interpreter' picks up a popular tune to 'vary it into the infinite and impossible—namely, into all of his own masks and multiplicities.'

Why would Plato use Socrates this way? Why would *we* want to cast their relationship in these terms? We've discussed the fact that Plato lived and practiced philosophy quite differently from Socrates, and we might suppose he had an interest in advocating his personal approach by subtly contrasting it with Socrates' version of the philosophical life. That's reasonable, it seems to me; and it's consistent with our reading of the *Phaedo* [with other dialogues too—for example, Plato's condemnation of the misuse of dialectic in *Republic* 7 reads very much like a criticism of Socratic practice; also telling is the fact that Socratic dialectic fails to dissuade Euthyphro from prosecuting his father despite it's being evident from the details of the case that he's in the wrong—as Nietzsche wrote in TI, dialectic arouses mistrust and isn't really persuasive].

As to our own motivations, I want to suggest that by underscoring the differences between Plato and Socrates *as philosophers* we might at last liberate ourselves from Socrates and ally ourselves instead with Plato; we might stand with the private ~~thinker-artist~~ friend of thinking against the public dialectician. As a character within the work, Socrates represents doctrine. Plato as the author represents the creative thinking-life of philosophy.

And speaking of the *Republic*, we should keep in mind that Plato is not the teacher of dialectic imagined in Book 6 of that work; he is rather the *author* of the book—an altogether different type. And we don't aspire to be teachers

of dialectic any more than we want to be scholars or disciples of philosophical dogma. We want to become philosophers ourselves, and toward this end, I think—no, I've *found*, in my own thinking life—I've found it helps to distance Plato from Socrates and align him rather with Nietzsche, philosopher-artist with philosopher-artist.

Th, March 7

So what to make of the *Phaedo*? What *is* it, exactly? It's a work of philosophy. Ok, but philosophy as...what? As *logos*, as *mythos*, as a *mythos-logos* or *diamythologomena*—things discussed by way of mythologizing?

Let's revisit our realization that the dialogue doesn't teach the possibility of permanent escape from the cycle of rebirth. This is not what the properly purified philosopher is after. So what does he want? He wants a long afterlife. The hope is to avoid falling back into a body too soon. Socrates wants to spend time with the gods, which is to say among the Forms, because only thus will he be reborn as a human, and the more knowledge he acquires while communing with the Forms the more likely it is he'll be reborn as a human *philosopher*. Socrates wants to ensure that his next incarnation not be as a donkey, a wolf, or even a social animal like a bee, in which form men are born who are temperate and just but without philosophical understanding (80b-82b). And of course he doesn't want to come back as just any type of man, a tyrant, say, or a blacksmith. No, Socrates hopes that when he returns he'll live precisely the sort of life he lived this time around, which is to say a philosophical life.

But that's Socrates, as a character in Plato's dialogue. I'm not convinced that Plato himself was committed to either reincarnation or the metaphysical apparatus associated with it. Why not? To begin with, there's the fact that he constantly undermines Socrates' arguments, exposing them as unsound at worst or as internally consistent but unproven at best. As I said on Tuesday, he's always working Socrates' *logoi* over into his own *mythos*.

There's also this. Recall Simmias's remark, following Socrates' last argument, that although he has no grounds to doubt what's been said, he still lacks belief due to the magnitude of the subject and 'human weakness' (107a-b). The word for weakness here is *astheneia*, and in the *Phaedo* it's associated with doubting, or failing to comprehend, the reality of the metaphysical. The latter association appears when Socrates attributes our inability to attain 'the true heaven, the true light, the true earth' to *astheneia*, precisely as this same condition prevents his imagined sea dwellers from knowing our realm above the waters (109b-110a). This word, *astheneia*, is associated also with the body as opposed to the soul (as at 87a and 87d-e).

I go into these details because, as I trust you remember, Plato isn't present for the conversation because '*êsthenei*,' which is to say he was suffering from *astheneia*. And this suggests to me that Plato means to align himself with those like Simmias who waver between belief and unbelief when it comes to the metaphysics of the *Phaedo*, and who value the body and embodied life in a way the characters in this radically ascetic dialogue apparently can't imagine.

So, as I say, I'm not convinced that Plato was committed to the metaphysics of the soul and the afterlife which Socrates defends in the *Phaedo*. As a character in the dialogue, Socrates is a literalist about these things; as author, Plato is writing figuratively. Plato agrees with Socrates that the life of the philosopher is the highest life, but he disagrees as to what exactly this entails. The authentic philosopher lives philosophy constantly, lives and loves it so thoroughly that he (or she) would even choose to philosophize forever, were that really possible. Plato's Socrates may hope that it is, but Plato evidently disagrees.

In short, then, as to the substance of the *Phaedo*: Socrates' desire literally to return to life in the future as a philosopher is Plato's mythologized affirmation of the philosophical life, here and now.

[John Burnet contended that the idea of a separable conscious soul originated with Socrates, and that Plato inherited the doctrine of Forms from him too, it being a Pythagorean teaching. I'm suggesting that we take Burnet's insight one step further: not only did Plato not invent these ideas—he had recurring radical doubts about the whole scheme.]

So what's up with the *Phaedo*? The honest answer is, as with every question about Plato, *I don't know*. But I will say this. The *Phaedo* is a work of philosophy, no doubt. But philosophy not as *logos*, nor even exactly as *mythos*. Rather, to recall a word I mentioned earlier, adapted from the *Phaedo* itself, it's philosophy as *diamythologomena*. That is to say, it's a sprawling, dense, deep, rich, complex work of philosophical art, a compendium of ideas and images, *logoi*

and *mythoi*, of assertions and contradictions, of arguments, puzzles, mysteries, and profundities, dreams, fantasies, musings, theories, intimations and provocations—and all this for the sake of thinking, for thinking as exploration, as experimentation, as overabundance, as spirit, as play, as life. In short, and to employ a Platonic formulation, we can call the *Phaedo* a philosophical-artistic production of *theia mania*. In Nietzsche's terms, *die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, *la gaya scienza*.

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For next week: free-form discussion on Plato and Nietzsche, both days. On Thursday assign the preface to *The Gay Science* for after spring break.