

SOCRATES' THERAPEUTIC USE OF INCONSISTENCY IN THE *AXIOCHUS*

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ABSTRACT

The pseudo-Platonic dialogue *Axiochus* seems irremediably confused. Its author tosses together Platonic, Epicurean and Cynic arguments against the fear of death, apparently with no regard for their consistency. Whereas in the *Apology* Socrates argues that death is *either* annihilation *or* a relocation of the soul, and is a blessing either way, in the *Axiochus* Socrates seems to assert that death is *both* annihilation *and* a release of the soul from the body into a better realm.

I argue that we can acquit the *Axiochus* from the charge of confusion if we pay attention to its genre, a consolation letter cast in dialogue form. The dialogue dramatizes a distinctive type of consolatory argumentative practice. Socrates' use of arguments with inconsistent premises, presented *in propria persona*, is only one of many ways in which he is willing to sacrifice argumentative hygiene for the sake of therapeutic effectiveness. These include appealing to emotion, tailoring arguments to the audience, and presenting invalid arguments so as to induce unjustified but comforting beliefs. In these respects, I think that Socrates' argumentative practice is best compared to *PH* III 280-1, where Sextus Empiricus says that the skeptic will deliberately use logically weak arguments as long as they work.

The few people familiar with the pseudo-Platonic dialogue *Axiochus* generally disdain it. It is easy to see why: the dialogue is a *mélange* of Platonic, Epicurean and Cynic arguments against the fear of death, seemingly tossed together with no regard whatsoever for their consistency. As Furley notes, the *Axiochus* appears horribly confused. Whereas in the *Apology* Socrates argues that death is *either* annihilation *or* a relocation of the soul, and is a blessing either way, “the Socrates of the *Axiochus* wants to have it both ways”: death is *both* annihilation *and* a release of the soul from the body into a better realm.¹ This may be used to construct a valid argument for the conclusion that death is not evil, but at the expense of having a contradiction as one of its premises.

Isnardi-Parente asserts that the dialogue represents a low point in the intellectual spirit of the Academy.² About the kindest words anyone can muster on behalf of the *Axiochus* on this score come from Dorothy Tarrant, who says that in it Socrates is “nobly inconsistent.”³

But D. S. Hutchinson has recently proposed that these inconsistencies shouldn't surprise us if we view the *Axiochus* as “an unconventional version of a very conventional genre—the consolation letter.”⁴ I wish here to expand on Hutchinson's brief suggestion and to explore the question of whether the *Axiochus* can be rehabilitated by paying attention to its genre. I will argue that the *Axiochus* can be acquitted of the charge of confusion if we view it as dramatizing an argumentative practice that uses the same sorts of methods as the therapeutic *ad hominem* argumentative procedure described by Sextus Empiricus in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* III 280-1, although with a different aim.

1. Synopsis of the Axiochus and its inconsistencies

Little is known about the authorship or date of composition of the *Axiochus*. It is certainly spurious: it includes arguments against the fear of death that originated with Epicurus, contains language common in later Greek and not used in Plato's time, and was grouped by Thrasyllus among the spurious dialogues at the end of his canon of Plato's works. The use of Epicurean arguments sets a *terminus post quem* of 300 BCE or so for its composition, with a *terminus ante quem* of whenever Thrasyllus gathered together his edition of the dialogues, sometime before his death in 36 CE.⁵ The linguistic evidence makes a date in the latter part of this range more likely.⁶ Many of the spurious dialogues were probably written by members of the Academy, but the mere fact that a dialogue was labeled ‘Platonic’ doesn't guarantee this. All it shows is that at some point it circulated

under Plato's name. Because we have so little information about the origin of the *Axiochus*, any arguments about its aims must proceed from the dialogue itself.

In the opening section of the *Axiochus* (364a-365a), Socrates meets Clinias, son of Axiochus, who pleads with Socrates to reassure his terminally ill father and ease his fear of death. Socrates agrees to console Axiochus, who is indeed very scared, although physically he feels somewhat better than before. Socrates starts by reproaching Axiochus for behaving in an unmanly and childish fashion by fearing death (365a-365b). He then offers various arguments against the fear of death. These include the following:

- *Epicurean*. The dead do not exist. Therefore, death is nothing to us. It does not concern the living, since they are not dead, nor does it concern the dead, since nothing can be of concern to those who don't exist. Death cannot deprive us of the goods of life, since after death we no longer exist in order to experience the deprivation. In a manner reminiscent of Lucretius (*DRN* 3 972-977), Socrates also compares pre-natal non-existence to post-mortem non-existence, saying that both are equally of no concern to us (365d-e and 369b-370a).⁷

- *Cynic/Cyrenaic*. Every period of life is full of misery and suffering. Socrates quotes approvingly Euripides' recommendation that we sing a dirge for the newly-born because they face so much misery, and he details the problems that beset infants, boys in school, those in military service, adults in every profession, from laborers to farmers to politicians, and the old. The gods release from life quickly those that they regard highly. Death, then, as an escape from all of the miseries of life, should be welcomed, not feared (366c-369b).⁸

• *Platonic I (à la Phaedo)*. The soul survives the death of the body. If the soul had a mortal nature, it would not be able to accomplish the lofty things it does, such as building cities, establishing governments, and setting up calendars that chart the movements of the heavenly bodies. Upon death, the soul passes from a life united with the body, which includes pain, to a purer state unmixed with any pain whatsoever, in which the soul will enjoy a tranquil life in which it can survey nature and practice philosophy in “the bountiful midst of truth.”⁹ Since death is a transition from something bad to something good, it should not be feared (365e-366b and 370b-d).

• *Platonic II (à la Gorgias)*. Socrates recounts a myth that he heard from the Persian sage Gobryas. Upon death, the soul goes to judgment by the gods in a place beneath the earth. Those who have led good lives reside in a place for the pious; its delights include musical concerts, wonderful drinking parties, self-furnished feasts, and temperate breezes. The wicked, on the other hand, go to eternal punishment: they are licked clean by wild beasts, set on fire constantly, and tortured by every type of torture. And so, the pious have nothing to fear from death (371a-372).¹⁰

Axiochus is simply confused by the Epicurean arguments, which he admits he doesn't understand and calls a “splendid parade of words.” He says that he needs something that comes down to his level (369d). The Cynic diatribe about the miseries of life doesn't seem to have much of an impact on him. However, he's quite impressed by the Phaedonic arguments and the promise of practicing philosophy and surveying nature in the bountiful midst of truth, declaring that he no longer has any fear of death, and even saying “I almost long for [death], if I may imitate the orators and use a hyperbole” (370d-e). But after hearing the Gorgianic myth and its description of dances in rings, temperate

breezes, a rich diet of pleasures, and self-furnishing feasts, Axiochus casts off all restraint: “I’m so far from fearing death now I actually passionately desire it” (372). Consolatory mission accomplished, Socrates toddles back to the Cynosarges.

The most obvious inconsistency in Socrates’ reasoning is that he asserts that there is no afterlife when he puts forward the Epicurean arguments, whereas the two Platonic arguments depend on the person being identified with his soul, which survives the death of the body and can enjoy a blessed afterlife. In addition, the two Platonic descriptions of the afterlife are inconsistent. According to the Phaedonic position, the pains a person experiences are due to the soul being imprisoned in the mortal prison of the body, and once it is released from that prison, it will no longer suffer pain and will journey to a place untroubled by anything bad. But according to the Gorgianic afterlife myth, the souls of the wicked will suffer greatly after death.

Furthermore, Socrates does not take any of the usual precautions that would allow a reader to avoid attributing inconsistencies to him. He does not say to Axiochus, “*If you believe that the dead do not exist, then...*” or “*If you believe the following about what occurs to the soul after it leaves the body, then...*” The arguments are not explicitly dialectical. Instead, he puts forward, apparently *in propria persona*, inconsistent statements. This is not obviously true of *everything* he asserts. He attributes the Cynic diatribes on the miseries of life to the sophist Prodicus and to the poets. The longer, second statement of the Epicurean arguments he also attributes to Prodicus (369b), while the Platonic description of an afterlife judgment is ascribed to Gobryas (371a). Nonetheless, some of the inconsistencies should be attributed to Socrates. Socrates puts forward as he own views both the first statement of the Epicurean position at 366d-e and

the Phaedonic argument on the survival of the soul and the nature of the afterlife. Furthermore, he says that he found Prodicus' discourse on the miseries of life so convincing that since then he has wanted to die (366c), seemingly indicating his own assent to it; and he also says that he himself is moved by what he heard from Gobryas and knows that the soul is immortal (372). *Axiochus* suffers from similar problems: at the end of the dialogue he says that he no longer fears death, both because of the description of the afterlife derived from Gobryas, "as well as by the [speech] about the heavens [i.e., the Phaedonic position]," without realizing that they are inconsistent.¹¹

2. *Inconsistency and the consolatio genre*

The *Axiochus*, then, seems either to be itself irremediably confused, or to present Socrates as an irremediably confused thinker. Since there is nothing within the dialogue itself that indicates that it is trying to portray Socrates in a bad light, it seems that it is the dialogue itself that is confused.

Hutchinson, however, claims that the *Axiochus* is an example of a literary genre common in the Roman world, the consolation letter, but with two important differences. First of all, the typical consolation letter is trying to reassure somebody dealing with *grief* at the death of a loved one, whereas the *Axiochus* depicts Socrates trying to reassure somebody dealing with *fear* at the prospect of his own death. Secondly, the consolation letter is a letter, whereas the *Axiochus* "[clothes] the *consolatio* in the guise of a Socratic dialogue" (Cooper and Hutchinson (1997) 1734-1735).

Despite these differences, says Hutchinson, we shouldn't be at all surprised to see Socrates "urging on *Axiochus* a wide variety of mutually incompatible consolations" (Cooper and Hutchinson (1997) 1734). After all, many authors within the *consolatio*

genre were primarily concerned with whether their arguments were *effective* rather than *consistent*. To illustrate this point, Hutchinson quotes Cicero describing his own *Consolation*, written after the death of his daughter: “I threw [all these kinds of consolation] together, for my soul was in a fever and I tried everything to cure it” (Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* III.76).¹²

The difference in topic between a typical consolation letter and Socrates’ consolation of Axiochus poses no difficulties for Hutchinson’s suggestion. The shift from letter to dialogue, however, is more problematic. A typical letter is directly addressed to a recipient who is reading it, or, if the reader isn’t the nominal recipient, he can at least put himself in the place of the recipient and read the letter as though he were the addressee. In this dialogue, the reader is an observer who is watching arguments being directed at Axiochus, the target of the consolation. In some cases, this ‘observer status’ might not pose a problem: the reader could identify himself with the object of the consolation, just as the third-party reader of the letter does. But in the case of the *Axiochus*, making this sort of identification is discouraged: Axiochus is depicted as rather stupid and unsympathetic. Also, the ‘conversion’ of Axiochus is presented schematically and unconvincingly—he goes from sackcloth and ashes to being eager for death in eight Stephanus pages. An effective dramatization of Axiochus’ plight and subsequent freedom from fear would allow the reader to identify with him more fully. Within the Platonic corpus, an example of an effective and more realistic dramatization of Socratic therapy which radically changes the interlocutor’s attitude, at least for the moment, would be the *Alcibiades*. Finally, even though deploying inconsistent arguments can be successful, an effective use of this strategy should not make the target of those arguments aware of the

inconsistencies, whereas the abrupt switches from argument to argument in the *Axiochus* make their inconsistencies glaringly obvious to the reader, if not to Axiochus himself. This isn't to say that a reader of the *Axiochus* couldn't be impressed by the Epicurean argument, or might not find the second description of the afterlife pleasures strikes a chord with her, and end up having her fear of death assuaged. But clothing the traditional consolation letter in the form of a dialogue—as least as done in the *Axiochus*—seems to hinder rather than help, *if* its task is to help console its readers.

Given these difficulties, I think we should change our understanding of what's going on with the genre of the *Axiochus*. *Within* the dialogue, Socrates is behaving toward Axiochus similarly to the way that the author of a consolation letter behaves towards the reader of the letter: he is willing to use inconsistent arguments, borrowed from any source, in order to soothe the patient. However, in *depicting* this type of consolatory relationship between Socrates and Axiochus, the dialogue itself is not aiming primarily at consoling its readers. Instead, it should be seen as displaying a certain type of consolatory argumentative practice for the reader's consideration. This practice is not argued for or described by anyone within the dialogue, but embodied in the dialogue as a whole.

3. *Socrates' consolatory techniques*

Socrates notes that Axiochus is “very much in need of consolation” (365a), and he uses any means necessary to accomplish this task. Socrates shows in many ways that he is willing to sacrifice argumentative hygiene for the sake of therapeutic effectiveness. These techniques include:

- *Using arguments with inconsistent premises, presented in propria persona.* This aspect of Socrates' procedure was noted above, but it is worth asking what its point might

be. As far as using arguments with inconsistent premises, the answer is straightforward: as a therapist, I may be unsure which beliefs my patient holds, and so I will try out arguments that derive from various premises, whether or not they're consistent, in order to try to find one that will be effective. In fact, because most people have inconsistent belief sets, two arguments that proceed from inconsistent premises can *both* hook into beliefs the patient has and work on him.

This still leaves open the question why these arguments should be presented *in propria persona*: if the therapeutic arguments are *ad hominem*, there would seem to be no need for the therapist himself to assent to their premises. Again, I think the answer would be that this way of proceeding can be more effective. If the arguments are explicitly presented in an *ad hominem* form: “if you accept *p*, then it follows that *q*,” a person will probably ask himself, “well, *do* I think that *p*?” On the other hand, if the therapist presents the arguments as his own view, some people—particularly ones that are fairly dim such as Axiochus—will be more likely simply to go along with the flow. This is especially likely when the patient regards the person presenting the argument as terribly clever, as Axiochus regards Socrates (366b).¹³

- *Appealing to emotion.* Socrates starts his work by appealing to Axiochus' sense of shame and pride, asserting that in fearing death Axiochus is being unmanly and childish (365a-b). He also appeals to his patriotism, saying “if nothing else, [you are] an Athenian!” (365a-b) Although it takes additional arguments to turn Axiochus around, these appeals apparently have some impact on him, as he admits later that in fearing death he was being weak (370e), and at the end says that he's too embarrassed to say anything to Socrates (372).

• *Tailoring arguments to the audience.* In the *Axiochus*, Socrates is depicted as throwing arguments against a wall, one after another, to see which of them will stick. His presentation of the arguments does not follow an internal rational order: Socrates presents one argument, abruptly breaks off to present a different one, and then sometimes returns to an earlier point, repeating and elaborating on it. He starts by giving the Epicurean argument against the fear of death at 365d-e but then interrupts it to give the Phaedonic conception of the afterlife and the Cynic description of the miseries of life before returning to the Epicurean arguments and elaborating on them further at 369b-370a. And his initial statement of the Phaedonic position at 365e-366b resumes and is supplemented by an argument for the immortality of the soul at 370b-d.

However, his procedure is not random; instead, it is tailored to what will work on Axiochus. Socrates begins by trying out various arguments on Axiochus. After the second presentation of the Epicurean argument, Axiochus admits that he doesn't understand it, complains that it is too abstract, and requests something easier: "My suffering is not relieved by ingenuity; it's satisfied only by what can come down to my level" (369e). Socrates soon obliges: after wrapping up the Epicurean argument (perhaps so that his pandering isn't too obvious), Socrates launches into the Phaedonic description of a blessed afterlife, "a place free from all struggle, grief, and old age" (370d). This is much more to Axiochus' taste. Then, having found what works, Socrates presses his advantage by presenting the second, Gorgianic afterlife myth. This is even closer to Axiochus' level: the earlier lofty talk of surveying nature and practicing philosophy in the afterlife is gone, replaced by fruits of every type, poets performing, dancing in rings, concerts, temperate

breezes, delightful drinking-parties, and so on (371c-d). It is the promise of these sorts of pleasures that finally wins Axiochus over entirely.¹⁴

- *Evasion.* After Socrates claims that death is a transition from something bad to something good (365e-366b), Axiochus asks Socrates, reasonably enough, why he doesn't kill himself if he thinks that living is something bad.¹⁵ Socrates replies

Axiochus, you don't give a true account of me; you think, like most Athenians, that just because I'm an inquirer I'm also an expert on something. I wish I knew these ordinary things, so far am I from knowing the extraordinary ones! My remarks are but echoes of the wise Prodicus... (366b-c).

Socrates then goes on to recount Prodicus' list of the miseries awaiting people at every stage of their lives. Socrates' response is a non-sequitur in several respects. Socrates had just claimed that nature devised the body to make the soul suffer, and that life is something bad, so Axiochus was not misrepresenting Socrates and falsely accusing him of expertise. Furthermore, to claim that he is merely echoing Prodicus in what he says is beside the point, as he also indicates that he agrees with Prodicus (366c), so Axiochus' question still stands. Finally, to reply that life is horrible doesn't address the question of why Socrates doesn't kill himself if he thinks that life is horrible. Despite its irrelevance, however, this reply lets Socrates get on to his next point, about the badness of life, and it also distracts Axiochus from his question, which could potentially derail Socrates' line of therapy.

- *Presenting invalid arguments so as to induce unjustified but comforting beliefs.*

The most striking feature of Socrates' procedure in the *Axiochus* is his willingness to use a defective argument that induces Axiochus to accept unjustified beliefs. This is not

merely a matter of an argument being presented in the dialogue that is, as a matter of fact, not cogent, which an interlocutor accepts. After all, most readers find the final argument for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo* less than satisfying, even though for Cebes and Simmias it is definitive, but we do not conclude from this that the *Phaedo* is depicting a therapeutic practice that prizes effectiveness over cogency in argumentation. Instead, the *Axiochus* depicts Socrates as using an argument which the dramatic context clearly flags as rationally defective.

What convinces Axiochus to cast off his fear of death entirely is the Gorgianic afterlife myth, in which Socrates vividly describes the tortures awaiting the impious and the delights awaiting the pious. This consolation is deeply problematic, and not only, or primarily, because Axiochus is given no reason for accepting Socrates' account of the afterlife other than its rhetorical force. In addition, *even if* Axiochus accepts Socrates' description of the afterlife, the dialogue makes it clear that he wouldn't be rationally justified in drawing from this the consolatory lesson that he does.

The myth at the close of the *Axiochus* gives reason to face death fearlessly only to those who are confident that they have lived righteously, since the wicked face eternal torture. Socrates himself says, in his summation of the argument, that Axiochus should be happy *if* he has lived piously (372). Without any comment on this point, Axiochus responds that he now passionately desires death, obviously assuming that after death he will enjoy the many delights awaiting the righteous in paradise. But the dialogue indicates that this confidence in his piety is misplaced.¹⁶ Within the dialogue, Axiochus comes across as fearful and self-centered. But more importantly, Axiochus was well-known as one of those condemned, along with Alcibiades, for profaning the Eleusinian mysteries in

415 BCE.¹⁷ In the immediately preceding afterlife myth, Socrates explicitly describes the blessed as ‘initiates’ who perform ‘sacred rites,’ and he then compares the initiation of the blessed to the initiation of Heracles and Dionysus into the Eleusinian mysteries. Under these circumstances, it seems rash for Axiochus to assume blithely that he will be among the blessed initiates. Instead, the dialogue indicates, he would more likely find himself among those licked clean by wild beasts and set on fire constantly by the Avengers.

Furthermore, Socrates may be encouraging Axiochus to draw this unwarranted conclusion. He presents the ‘two-way’ judgment myth, but then, after saying that Axiochus must decide for himself whether to accept it, adds “I know only this for sure: every soul is immortal, and also, when removed from this place, free from pain” (372). This addendum, however, importantly misrepresents the immediately preceding myth, according to which *not* every soul is free from pain, since the wicked suffer quite horribly. But the addendum has the effect of drawing Axiochus’ attention to the more hopeful afterlife option, which he was probably already inclined to think was awaiting him.

4. The Distinctive Model of Therapy in the Axiochus

The *Axiochus* dramatizes a therapeutic argumentative practice in which, in order to calm his patient, Socrates is willing to advance invalid and inconsistent arguments in his own person, to tailor these arguments to the psychological foibles of his audience, to appeal to his audience’s emotions, and to engage in evasive maneuvers when needed in order to keep on the therapeutic course. Simply to note that Socrates engages in therapeutic *ad hominem* argumentation puts his practice in a broad category. The particular

variant of therapeutic argumentation on display in the *Axiochus*, however, is quite distinctive, as can be seen by comparing it to some other ancient varieties of such argumentation.

A therapeutic argument aims at relieving distress, disease or disorder in its target, not only at establishing the truth or acceptability of some claim, although the two aims need not be mutually exclusive. And so, any practice of therapeutic argumentation will contain, either explicitly or implicitly, a conception of psychic disease and health, and perhaps even of human flourishing. The particular techniques contained within some practice of therapeutic argumentation are advocated, at least in part, because they are seen as effective means for relieving psychic distress, so conceived. Obviously, then, practices of therapeutic argumentation can differ in their techniques because they are working with differing conceptions of psychic distress, but even practices that embody similar aims can differ radically on which techniques are taken to achieve that aim.

The most obvious parallel to the *Axiochus* lies in the writings of the skeptical academy, since both the *Axiochus* and the skeptical academy lay out the arguments of various philosophical schools on a topic.¹⁸ This similarity is superficial, however. In the skeptical academy, the arguments of various philosophers for opposing conclusions—for instance, that virtue is sufficient for happiness and that it is not—are laid out. The primary purpose of doing this is to disabuse people of their hubristic pretension that they have knowledge on these questions. A secondary purpose is to allow people, by working through the arguments themselves, to come to a provisional, modest and fallible view about which answer is the most plausible.¹⁹ In the *Axiochus*, all of the arguments point to the same conclusion, and Socrates has no concern with bringing Axiochus to a reasoned

evaluation of their merits. A skeptic such as Cicero would most likely view this as encouraging the very dogmatic rashness that skeptics endeavor to cure people of.²⁰

This difference in argumentative practice can, I think, be traced to the differing conceptions of psychic distress that guide the practices. It may be true, as Dorothy Tarrant claims (Tarrant (1995) 292), that what links the Socrates of the *Axiochus* to Socrates as he appears elsewhere in the Platonic corpus is that he cares about the welfare of his interlocutor's *psyche*. But this concern takes a quite different form in the *Axiochus* from the usual one. The academic skeptics draw their inspiration from Socrates' declaration that his human wisdom consists in not thinking that he knows what he does not (*Apology* 21d), that having unjustified beliefs is a kind of psychic pollution, and that subjecting people to the therapy of cross-examination helps cleanse them of this pollution (*Sophist* 230a-e).

Psychic therapy in the *Axiochus* aims at relief from pain, not the removal of the pollution of unjustified beliefs. At the beginning of the dialogue, Clinias reports that his father is miserable, and he asks Socrates to reassure him in his usual way so that he can meet his fate without complaining (364b-c). Socrates agrees, and his behavior is consistent with this limited objective: as long they make Axiochus feel better, Socrates is unafraid to use defective arguments that induce him to accept unjustified beliefs.²¹

I think that Socrates' argumentative procedure is best compared to the Pyrrhonian use of arguments, as Sextus Empiricus describes it in the last chapter of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*PH* III xxxii 280-1). There, Sextus considers the question of why the skeptic sometimes deliberately puts forward feeble arguments. His answer is that the skeptic, as a philanthropist, desires to cure dogmatists of their rashness and of the distress dogmatism

causes.²² For some dogmatists, feeble arguments work, and so the skeptic uses feeble arguments on such dogmatists. For both Sextus and Socrates in the *Axiochus*, the goal of offering arguments is to soothe distress, and arguments are deployed to meet this goal with no regard for the logical strength of the arguments, except insofar as logical strength aids effectiveness. The primary difference between them is that Socrates, unlike Sextus, is not aiming at producing *epochê* in his patient. Sextus says that tranquility results from suspending judgment on philosophical questions (*PH* I xii 25-30), such as whether there is an afterlife and whether death is by nature good or bad. Socrates relieves the fear of death by trying to induce definite beliefs in Axiochus about what will occur in the afterlife, and definite beliefs about these things being good for him.

5. Objections, replies, and conclusion

If this interpretation of the *Axiochus* is accepted, then its depiction of Socrates' use of inconsistent arguments and other underhanded tactics might be regarded by the reader as bracingly realistic, or as dishonest and vicious, or both, but it wouldn't be the result of simple intellectual confusion. I would like to view the *Axiochus* in this way: if nothing else, it makes the *Axiochus* much more interesting, and the principle of charity directs us to interpret works in a way that acquits them of the charge of falling into elementary confusions, if such interpretations are available and are plausible. But this appeal to the principle of charity can be objected to in at least two ways, from *authorial incompetence* and from *intrinsic implausibility*. Let me close this paper by describing and rebutting these objections.

First, it may be objected, the principle of charity involves giving the author of a text the benefit of the doubt, and in this case it is unclear that the author has earned this

consideration. I've been arguing that many of the argumentative 'infelicities' committed by Socrates should be viewed as dramatizing a certain mode of therapeutic practice. If the author is trying to dramatize this practice, however, he makes a hash of it at a number of points in his actual construction of the dialogue. These gaffes might lead us to suspect that Socrates' argumentative 'infelicities' are the result of authorial incompetence, not cunning design.

A person may use inconsistent arguments, but ordinarily there would either be some space in between them, or some other sort of transition. Socrates, however, contradicts himself within a few lines in an implausible manner. At 365e, after saying that Axiochus should dismiss his foolish worries about his body rotting after death (using the Epicurean argument that Axiochus won't exist after his death), he immediately asserts that the body is not the person, but instead the soul is, a soul which is an immortal being locked up inside a mortal prison. The same sort of thing happens at 370a-b. Socrates is restating the Epicurean argument, and stresses the point that death cannot deprive the dead of anything, because dead people do not exist. Then he immediately launches into a proof for the immortality of the soul: "...because you're afraid to be deprived of your soul, you invest this deprivation with a soul of its own; and you dread the absence of perception, but you think you will perceptually grasp this perception that is not to be. As well as many other fine arguments for the immortality of the soul, a mortal nature surely would not have risen to such lofty accomplishments..." This is jarring, to say the least.

Although it does not involve juxtaposing contradictions, 369a-b also shows lack of care. After Socrates details the miseries in store for people in every profession, including politicians, Axiochus breaks in to say he agrees with Socrates about the toils

that politicians face. Socrates uses this as an opportunity to ask Axiochus whether he agrees that death is an escape from the miseries of life. But then, instead of waiting for any sort of reply from Axiochus—which is what we’d expect from even minimally competent dialogue, since Socrates is addressing Axiochus directly—Socrates immediately launches into the Epicurean argument against the fear of death again, and Axiochus doesn’t bat an eye at this.

I admit, then, that the dialogue is flawed in its construction. The impression created by these passages is that the *Axiochus* is a fairly crude cut-and-paste job, of the sort sometimes turned in by plagiarists who are too unskilled to smooth out the discrepancies between what’s being copied.²³ And these gaffes make us cautious about reading too much philosophical significance into certain details of the dialogue that would be plausibly explained by authorial incompetence. For instance, it may be going too far, as I did above, to view Socrates’ *non sequitur* of a reply to Axiochus’ question at 366b as Socrates throwing dust into Axiochus’ eyes in order to keep the therapeutic conversation on track. An equally likely explanation is simply that the author needed some way of moving from the section asserting that the afterlife is a transition from something bad to something good to the later Cynic material attributed to Prodicus. So he slapped in Axiochus’ question and Socrates’ reply as a rough-and-ready bridge from one to the other.

However, I do not think that these problems are so severe that we should reject the overall interpretation proposed here. The dialogue is a pastiche, and sometimes the seams show. However, the dialogue is not *merely* a pastiche; instead, it shows signs that these elements are put together with some care. The dialogue is explicitly framed as a

consolation, a genre in which effectiveness is sometimes prized over consistency. Furthermore, the author dramatizes how Socrates deploys these incompatible arguments in order to soothe Axiochus: Socrates tacks back and forth between different arguments, some which work, and some which don't, and he follows up on the ways which are effective. And the ironic context of the final argument, where Axiochus displays a misplaced confidence that he will be one of the pious initiates, shows Socrates using an argument that is effective but not cogent.

Second, some people may be put off by the apparent cynicism and lack of respect for Axiochus' intellectual autonomy on the part of Socrates, and use this as the basis for an objection. Even if the therapeutic practice that I describe helps us to account for many details of what goes on in the dialogue, that practice is both repulsive and thoroughly unSocratic, so much so that considerations of charity lean against accepting this interpretation of what Socrates is supposed to be doing, even within a spurious dialogue.

I myself think that the academic skeptics' practice, as described above, is more attractive and better comports with most of the depictions of Socrates within Plato's dialogues. However, even if the argumentative practice is unpalatable, it isn't obviously absurd or intellectually indefensible. The principle that sometimes people are better off having comforting but unjustified beliefs is both widely held—every parent who lies to his child about Santa Claus, and doctor who deceives a terminally ill patient about his true condition, evinces it—and *prima facie* plausible. If, all else being equal, a person is better off being at peace than feeling distress, the presumption would be that he is better off with comforting but unjustified beliefs. This presumption would need to be overridden by further considerations, for instance, that in the long run having such

unjustified beliefs leads to greater distress (as the Epicureans hold) or that the state of having unjustified beliefs is in itself bad enough to outweigh any hedonic benefits (as the discussion of refutation as psychic cleansing in *Sophist* 230 a-e suggests).²⁴ And if one accepts this principle, then using the sorts of techniques Socrates does in the *Axiochus* is a fitting way of acting on that principle, since these techniques are often effective ways to convince people to believe what you want them to. If they were not, it would not be necessary to teach students how to identify and defend themselves against fallacious forms of argumentation.

Furthermore, within Plato's dialogues, Socrates sometimes seems to display disrespect for others' reason both in his proposals and in his methods of argumentation. For instance, Socrates advocates 'beneficial lying' in general in *Republic* 382c6-d3 and 389b2-c6; also the Myth of Metals (*Rep.* 414b8-415d5) and the rigged mating lottery (*Rep.* 459c8-460a10) are examples of such lies. Some irritated interlocutors, like Thrasymachus and Calicles, complain about Socrates' tactics, and many readers of Plato's dialogues suspect that these interlocutors have a point: that Socrates not only advances flawed arguments, he deliberately uses sophistical debating tactics to get his interlocutors to agree to things they shouldn't.²⁵ And so, it would not be gratuitously perverse or bizarre for somebody familiar with Plato's dialogues to use the figure of Socrates to dramatize the type of argumentative therapy I take the *Axiochus* to dramatize. Whether or not it is ultimately unSocratic, its picture of Socrates does draw upon recognizable elements of Plato's dialogues.

If we read the *Axiochus* charitably, we can see that it deserves neither neglect nor scorn. It is not an irremediably confused mish-mash of arguments against the fear of

death, put in the mouth of Socrates with no recognition that they are incompatible. Instead, it is one of the most idiosyncratic works that have come down to us under Plato's name, a dialogue that depicts for our consideration a distinctive and provocative argumentative practice.²⁶

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¹ Furley (1986) 78. Furley's discussion of the *Axiochus* runs from 77-80.

² Isnardi-Parente (1961) 46-7, cited in Furley (1986) 78. For references to further disparagement of the dialogue, see Hershbell (1981) 23 n. 5.

³ Tarrant (1995) 292.

⁴ Cooper and Hutchinson (1997) 1734. Hutchinson's remarks occur in his introduction to the dialogue.

⁵ I myself am cautious about athetizing dialogues, such as the *Alcibiades* or *Clitophon*, based on supposedly unPlatonic content, but I make an exception for obvious anachronisms such as the use of Epicurean arguments. (See Bowen (1988) 52-55 for a brief synopsis of the history of this athetization—at one point, all but nine dialogues had been declared spurious—and pointers to further references.) Besides Thrasyllus, Diogenes Laertius (III 62) also numbers the *Axiochus* among the works acknowledged as spurious, and the ancients were much less likely than we are to write dialogues off as spurious.

⁶ For a summary of the linguistic evidence, see Hershbell (1981) 12-13. The dialogue was probably composed in the second century BCE or later.

⁷ Of course, Socrates does not say that the argument is Epicurean. As elsewhere in the dialogue, this anachronistic material is either advanced by Socrates in his own person or placed in the mouth of a contemporary or predecessor of Socrates—in this case, Socrates first advances the Epicurean arguments *in propria persona*, and later says he heard them from Prodicus.

⁸ The overall argument concerning death is not Cynic in origin, but the portrayal of the difficulties in life is drawn from Cynic sources. Hershbell (1981) 16-17 details the close similarities between the catalog of miseries in the various stages of life in the *Axiochus* and descriptions of life's miseries given by Crates and Bion, which are close enough to make borrowing likely. Crates, of course, does not draw from these considerations the conclusion that life is bad. Instead, he says that *if* pleasure were the measure of happiness, nobody would be happy, whereas Crates himself would make virtue the measure of happiness. (See Long (1996) 41-45 for more on the ethics of Crates.) Interestingly, the Cyrenaic Hegesias (as a hedonist and a pessimist) does draw exactly this conclusion (DL 2.94). The reviewer from *Phronesis* points out that laments of the miseries of life were also common to fifth-century tragedy, the explicit source Socrates cites within the dialogue.

⁹ All translations are by Jackson P. Hershbell, from Cooper and Hutchinson (1997).

¹⁰ For ease of subsequent reference, I label these Platonic passages after the dialogues they most strongly resemble, although the fit is far from exact. The proof of the soul's immortality (because of the loftiness of its intellectual accomplishments in 370b-c) is reminiscent of the affinity argument for the soul's immortality in *Phaedo* 78b-80b, although the affinity argument would not include accomplishments such as building

cities. The descriptions of death as the release of soul from the prison of the body at 365e-366b and 370d also recall the *Phaedo*, as does the description at 370d of an afterlife in which the soul will be able to practice philosophy “in the bountiful midst of truth.” The afterlife myth from Gobryas recalls the afterlife myth at 523a-527e that closes the *Gorgias*, the only work of Plato’s in which there is a *final* judgment of souls, with the virtuous eternally rewarded and the ‘incurably’ wicked eternally punished. Hutchinson labels 370b-d as ‘Stoic’ (Hutchinson (1997) 1734), but I am unsure why. Most Stoics would agree that the souls of the wise, at least, usually survive the death of the body, although this might depend on the circumstances of death, but I am unaware of any precedent for the *Axiochus*’ argument for the soul’s immortality in the Stoics. Furthermore, no Stoics believe that the soul is *immortal*. As physical bodies, souls eventually fall apart, and even the best souls cannot survive the periodic conflagration that restarts the cosmic cycle. This passage does, however, contain the Stoic idea that the human soul possesses a divine *pneuma* which enables it to gain insight into the cosmos (noted in Hershbell (1981) 17-18).

¹¹ I do not wish to minimize the inconsistencies between the different sections of the dialogue—indeed, in order for the dialogue to illustrate the argumentative procedure I think it does, I need to insist on them. However, with the exception of the Epicurean material, which is clearly deviant, the other sections of the dialogue can—with some tweaking and twisting—be made to tell an almost consistent story. In 365e-366b, Socrates gives the basic position: the person is identified with his soul. In this life, the soul, being joined with the body, is subject to many pains and ills, whereas in the afterlife it returns to its “native heavenly aether.” Thus, death is a transition from something bad to something good, and should therefore not be feared. The Cynic-inspired passage can be viewed as helping to support the contention that this life is something bad. The second Phaedonic passage adds a proof of the soul’s immortality, bolstering the contention that death is a transition to another state, and gives a more vivid description of the afterlife, to reinforce the point that the transition is to something *good*. The final Gorgianic myth amends the above argument: the blessed afterlife will be enjoyed *only* by the righteous, whereas the wicked will suffer greatly, so that *if* one is pious, one should not fear death, since *for the pious* death is a transition from something bad to something good. It is this argument as a whole that is effective on Axiochus, whereas the Epicurean arguments that Socrates also retails don’t work. Even with this tweaking, however, rough edges remain:

365e-366b attributes suffering to the fact that the soul is united to the body, whereas in the Gorgianic myth disembodied souls can suffer, and *after* stating that the wicked suffer, Socrates then reverts to his earlier position when he says to Axiochus that *every* soul “when removed from this place, [is] free of pain.” (372a)

¹² Wayne Olson has pointed out to me that we need to be cautious about drawing too strong a parallel between the *Axiochus* and Cicero’s *Consolation*. He notes that Cicero qualifies his statement about throwing together inconsistent arguments in order to relieve his distress by introducing it with the adverbial phrase *ut fere*: “*Nearly as I threw all these kinds of consolations together.*” This suggests that Cicero himself did not use all of the arguments against grief that he had previously listed in the *Tusculan Disputations*. Furthermore, says Olson, Cicero in his *Consolation* is both therapist and fevered patient, putting him in quite a different position from Socrates’ in the *Axiochus*.

I think that Olson is correct to warn against drawing too close a parallel between Cicero’s *Consolation* in particular and the *Axiochus*, but this does not undermine Hutchinson’s basic point that the consolation genre provides a comparable usage of inconsistent arguments. In *TD* III.76, Cicero lists five different methods used by comforters. These methods do not proceed from consistent premises, since the first method (of the Stoic Cleanthes) is to insist that the death of a loved one is not evil, whereas most of the others (such as the Peripatetic strategy of insisting that the evil is not so serious) presume that the death of a loved one is evil. Cicero then says that some people are in favor of collecting together (*colligo*) all of the previous 5 methods, nearly as (*ut fere*) Cicero did in his own *Consolation*. Thus, whether or not Cicero himself systematically deployed inconsistent consolatory arguments in his own *Consolation*, *TD* III.76 does clearly show that there were extant around Cicero’s time people who did advocate this sort of consolatory practice. Of course, this still leaves open the question of why Cicero qualifies his own usage of the practice. My guess is that Cicero does so because he might have omitted some of the previous methods on his list when throwing them together in his own *Consolation*; Cicero makes it clear (*TD* III.77, cf. *TD* II.29-30) that he doesn’t think that Cleanthes’ strategy of simply denying that anything bad has happened is effective.

¹³ In fairness to Socrates, it should be noted that he specifically tells Axiochus that he should not accept what he says on his authority alone but should decide for himself. (372)

¹⁴ Besides depicting Socrates' argumentative practice on Axiochus in particular, the author of the *Axiochus* may also be trying to make in passing a wider, rather sardonic point about what sorts of arguments are actually likely to be successful in relieving the fear of death for most people. The Epicurean arguments, which turn on the rather abstruse point that death removes the supposed subject of harm from the picture, are much less likely to be effective than the promise of lots of pleasures in a blissful afterlife, and these pleasures ought to be described in ways that appeal to the sensibilities of most people.

¹⁵ If Axiochus' question were presented as an *objection* to what Socrates says, it would be an invalid *ad hominem* attack, based on the claim that Socrates' actions are inconsistent with his doctrine. But given what Socrates has just said about life and death, wondering why Socrates doesn't kill himself is natural enough. Socrates raises a similar question in *Phaedo* 62a-c, for similar reasons, but in the *Phaedo* Socrates confronts the issue rather than evading it.

¹⁶ Axiochus, of course, is not alone in suffering from this particular brand of *hubris*. See, for instance, the Harris poll of the religious and other beliefs of Americans. Of the 84% of the public who believe the soul survives the death of the body, almost two-thirds (63%) believe they will go to heaven, whereas only 1% expect to go to hell. (*The Harris Poll*[®] #11, February 26, 2003. The Religious and Other Beliefs of Americans 2003. Results available at <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=359>.)

¹⁷ See Nails (2002) 63-6 for more information on the life of Axiochus and 17-22 for a description of the sacrilegious crimes of 415.

¹⁸ This may be why Hutchinson asserts that the author of the *Axiochus* was most likely a Platonist writing between 100 BCE and 50 CE (Cooper and Hutchinson (1997) 1735).

¹⁹ The above description of the two aims of academic argumentation is Cicero's. For a fuller explanation of Cicero on this topic, see Thorsrud (2002); in this paper Thorsrud also argues for the controversial claim that Cicero shares this moderate fallibilism with Carneades and Arcesilaus.

²⁰ However, the *Axiochus* may not be so distant from Cicero's practice in some of his court speeches, where he boasts of throwing dust in the eyes of the jury in order to obtain the outcome he desires. (See Quintilian, *Inst.* 2. 17. 21, and Smith (1995) for an extensive discussion of rhetoric as used by Cicero in his court cases and in his philosophical works.) However, the two differ insofar as Cicero pursues argumentative victory

without scruple in the courts for the sake of the good of his client and the advancement of his own career, rather than the welfare of his audience.

²¹ Therefore, even though they both target grief and are tailored to the situation of the interlocutor, I think that Socrates' practice differs significantly from the sort of transitional *ad hominem* therapy of grief propounded by the Stoic Chrysippus, which Cicero describes and endorses in *Tusculan Disputations* III.61-75. The nub of Chrysippus' strategy is not to target directly the griever's belief that he has lost something of value—you don't say "you mistakenly believe that your daughter was a good for you, but she was really merely a preferred indifferent," as earlier Stoics such as Cleanthes did. Chrysippus maintains (rightly) that this approach probably wouldn't be effective. Instead, the therapist should target the mourner's belief that it is *appropriate* to mourn and to feel so much pain. This approach is more likely to work. Moreover, because he is no longer mourning, the patient may be in a better position to be moved toward virtue and to be convinced of the truth of theses such as 'virtue is the only good.' On this model, the ultimate aim is to relieve distress *so that* the patient may return to the task of pursuing virtue, rather than beginning and ending with the relief of distress. Furthermore, on this model one provides *indirect* arguments, rather than *rationaly feeble* ones, and nothing indicates that Chrysippus thought that his arguments against the appropriateness of mourning and feeling pain at the loss of a loved one either proceeded from false premises or had conclusions that didn't follow from their premises. (See White (1995) for more on Chrysippean transitional therapy.)

²² In *PH* 280-1 itself, Sextus refers only to the dogmatists' rashness and conceit. However, given his self-description as a 'philanthropist,' and his many comments elsewhere about the way in which holding beliefs about the natures of things leads to distress (see e.g., *PH* I 25-30, III 235-8, *M* XI 110-67), I think it is safe to describe the Sextan skeptic as seeking to cure the dogmatist of his distress by offering effective arguments, with no regard as to their cogency.

²³ In making this comparison, I mean to impute only incompetence to the author of the *Axiochus*, not dishonesty, since doing so would be wildly anachronistic. In the ancient world, unattributed bits and pieces of others' work could be cut and pasted into one's own writing with no dishonest intent, but the author

should still try to work them smoothly into his own writing so that the seams don't show as they do in the *Axiochus*.

²⁴ I wish to show only that this principle is plausible, so that considerations of charity do not give us strong reason to rule out the interpretation I here propose, not that it is true, so I will not engage in a lengthy defense of it. Furthermore, even if one were to accept it, there might be further reasons not to engage in 'beneficial lying,' e.g., one might think that the action violates one's moral duty or is vicious, even if it would benefit the patient.

²⁵ I do not wish to argue that this 'sophistical' portrait of Socrates is correct, either in Plato's dialogues as a whole or some particular dialogues, only that it is not utterly alien. For a catalog of the many places in the elenctic dialogues where Socrates may plausibly be taken to argue sophistically, see Beversluis (2000). Beversluis tries to expose the "dark and even ominous side [of] this alleged moral gadfly" (15) who often uses "faulty arguments" and "unscrupulous dialectical tactics" (14). (See Christopher Gill's review of Beversluis (Gill (2001)), which makes the cogent criticism that Plato's writing of the dialogues seems like a pointless enterprise on this reading (311)). For detailed proposals that particular dialogues display Socrates arguing sophistically, see Klosko (1979) and Thorsrud (n.d.) on the *Protagoras* and Gentzler (1995) on the *Gorgias*. (Each argues that Socrates uses sophistical tactics for ends that are ultimately non-sophistic, which helps each to avoid Gill's criticism of Beversluis.)

²⁶ Many people helped me to improve this paper, and I'd like to thank them: Wayne Olsen, Hal Thorsrud, Alex Mourelatos, Steve Strange, D. S. Hutchinson, Sandra Peterson, Julia Annas, David Armstrong, the referee at *Phronesis*, and audience members at the 27th Annual Workshop in Ancient philosophy and at the Twelfth Annual Minnesota Conference on Ancient Philosophy.