

‘A COCK FOR ASCLEPIUS’*

In any list of famous last words, Socrates’ are likely to figure near the top. Details of the final moments of celebrities tend anyway to exert a peculiar fascination upon the rest of us: life’s very contingency provokes a need to see lives nevertheless as meaningful organic wholes, defined as such precisely by their final closure; so that even the most trivial aspects of their ending can come to seem bearers of profound significance, soliciting moral reflections apparently not less urgent for their being quite unwarranted.¹ From earliest times, this fascination with last moments has come to be concentrated in particular upon last words:² situated at that most mysterious of borders, between life and death, they seem to look backwards and forwards at once, judging the speaker’s own past life from the vantage-point of a future realm he is about to attain and hinting at the nature of what awaits us all from the perspective of that past life he still – however tenuously – shares with us. A moment earlier, and there is no reason to privilege any one discourse of the speaker’s above another; a moment later, and his lips are sealed for ever. Only in that final moment can he seem to pass an unappealable judgement on himself, to combine in a single body two incompatible subjectivities, the one suffering and extremely mortal, the other dispassionate and transcendent. If he is a thinker or a man of action, this is his last chance to summarize a lifetime’s meditation or experience in a pithy, memorable aphorism. If he is a celebrated poet, he can be imagined to have composed his own epitaph;³ if he is a Hellenistic poet, he may even in fact have done so.⁴

All this aura surrounds Socrates’ last words, but they also have a special attraction of their own: here the philosopher who did not write speaks to us for the very last time; the thinker for whom philosophy was a preparation for death utters his dying words; the man upon whose life Athens passed sentence now passes his own. Furthermore, the scene in the *Phaedo* in which they are reported ranks among the most celebrated in Greek literature – and for good reason: for it is one of the most

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¹ M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*¹² (Tübingen, 1972), §46–8, pp. 235–46, subjects this tendency to a remarkably acute and poignant phenomenological analysis.

² C. Gnlika, ‘Ultima verba’, *JAC* 22 (1979), 5–21. W. Schmidt, *De ultimis morientium verbis* (Diss. Marburg, 1914) provides a rather heterogeneous and poorly organized collection of Greek and Roman examples ranging from Homer to the New Testament (and beyond). On the ancient *exitus* genre, cf. F. A. Marx, ‘Tacitus und die Literatur der exitus illustrium virorum’, *Philologus* 92 (1937), 83–103; P. Schunck, ‘Studien zur Darstellung des Endes von Galba, Otho und Vitellius in den Historien des Tacitus’, *SO* 39 (1964), 38–82; F. Römer, ‘Ein Glanzstück römischer Memorabilienliteratur (Val. Max. 2, 6, 8)’, *Wiener Humanistische Blätter* 31 (1989), 52–65.

³ Homer: *Certamen* 332–8 Allen, *Vita* V.47–52 Allen: doubts on this score expressed polemically in *Vita Herodotea* 512–16 Allen. Virgil: *Vita Donati* 36 (14.136–40 Hardie), Hieronymus *Chronicon* 165 h 21. ad Ol. 190.3 (37.7 Hardie); doubts on this score perhaps implied *e silentio* in *Vita Probiana* 27.18–21 Hardie.

⁴ Callimachus 35 Pf. (= *Hellenistic Epigrams* xxx. 1185–6 Gow–Page, *A. P.* 7.524); Leonidas xciii. 2535–40 Gow–Page (= *A. P.* 7.715); Meleager ii–iv. 3984–4007 (= *A. P.* 7.417–19). For some Latin variations, cf. Hor. *Car.* 3.30, Prop. 1.22.

consummate products of Plato's artistry as a writer. Now that the doubts of Simmias and Cebes concerning the immortality of the individual soul have been confuted by argument and by myth,⁵ Plato can direct his formidable dramatic skills to other considerations: the fate of Socrates' body; his biological family, children and women; and his truer, philosophical family, the disciples who will soon be orphans (116a6–7). A crescendo of tears – the prison officer,⁶ Phaedo,⁷ Crito, and of course Apollodorus, whose sobs weaken the others' last restraints⁸ – might provoke the reader's own, were it not blocked by Socrates' good-natured reprimand. When the mortal chill starts to move slowly up his body, the style itself, as if chastened, becomes heroically matter-of-fact: no longer are moods and emotions described, but only actions and sensations; first-person verbs and pronouns are almost entirely replaced by third-person ones; *oratio recta* yields to *oratio obliqua*. The temporal duration of Socrates' dying is mapped, clinically and dispassionately, on to the spatial extension of his body: the chill moves up from his feet; when it reaches his heart, he will be dead. Everything seems to be going as forecast, step by step, towards the end we cannot help but foresee. Then, suddenly – the time-point is determined exactly by reference to the cold reaching Socrates' abdomen – with a climactic grammatical construction designed to put all the weight upon what follows⁹ and with a dramatic gesture of self-unveiling (only now do we learn, parenthetically, that Socrates had covered his face), we return to an *oratio recta* announced by a *verbum dicendi* and emphasized by the announcement, preceding the words themselves, that they were Socrates' last: ὦ Κρίτων, ἔφη, τῷ Ἀσκληπιῷ ὀφείλομεν ἀλεκτρύονα: ἀλλὰ ἀπόδοτε καὶ μὴ ἀμελήσητε (7–8). Crito promises and asks if Socrates wishes anything else. Socrates, who has covered his face again,¹⁰ says nothing, then shudders: he is dead.

Small wonder, then, that Plato's report of Socrates' last words helped secure for them a celebrity lasting throughout antiquity and the modern period. But at the same time, the evident discrepancy between those words and the immediate situation has made the question of their meaning acute and unavoidable: what on earth does a rooster or Asclepius have to do with Socrates dying of poison in a prison cell?

In trying to answer this question, it is important that we bear in mind a fundamental distinction: between what *Socrates* may have meant by what he said and what *Plato* may have meant by what he wrote. To be sure, it is quite likely that the actual words uttered by Socrates and those written by Plato were identical, i.e. that Plato has accurately reported Socrates' dying utterance:¹¹ the last words of the great

⁵ Whether to *our* satisfaction is not at issue here.

⁶ To break the tension and heighten the dramatic pathos, Socrates even makes a joke before drinking the poison: see J. Burnet (ed.), *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford, 1911), pp. 116–17 *ad* 117b5, b6.

⁷ Phaedo's admission that he is weeping in reality not for Socrates but for himself is an allusion to (or a reminiscence of) a celebrated Homeric verse (*Il.* 19.302) which was to become a cliché in the Greek romances (Chariton 8.5.2; Ach. Tat. 2.34.7; Heliod. 1.18.1).

⁸ Already at the beginning of the dialogue (59a), Phaedo had referred to Apollodorus' lack of self-restraint as notorious: this is not the only example of ring-composition in this text (see below, nn. 13 and 69). On Apollodorus' reputation, cf. *Symp.* 173d.

⁹ ἦδη οὖν σχεδόν τι αὐτοῦ ἦν τὰ περὶ τὸ ἥτρον ψυχόμενα, καὶ... 118a5–6. The construction (but not its emphatic force) is recognized by LSJ s.v. καὶ A.III.3; R. Kühner–B. Gerth, *Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache* (Hannover-Leipzig, 1904³ = Hannover, 1976), ii. 2, p. 231; and J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles*² (Oxford, 1954), p. 293 s.v. καὶ I (10).

¹⁰ This is not stated explicitly, but can be inferred with certainty from the words a few lines later, ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἐξεκάλυψεν αὐτόν (118a12–13).

¹¹ So especially James R. Baron, 'On Separating the Socratic from the Platonic in *Phaedo* 118', *CPh* 70 (1975), 268–9, here p. 269; Schmidt, *op. cit.*, pp. 54, 55; U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Platon*² (Berlin, 1920), i. 172, 178 n. 1, 325; ii. 57. Despite the arguments advanced

man are unlikely to have been forgotten by those who were so attached to him; nor is it easy to see why they would have been reported falsely to Plato, especially given their enigmatic content; and Plato himself, writing only a decade or two after Socrates' death, could scarcely have risked publishing a falsification that witnesses still alive could be expected to repudiate at once.¹² But though the words themselves are likely to have been the same, there may well be a difference between the meanings Socrates and Plato attached to them – for example, it is reasonable to suspect that it was part of Plato's intention thereby to demonstrate that the accusation of impiety made against Socrates was unfounded,¹³ but it would clearly be absurd to impute the same intention to Socrates himself¹⁴ – and there certainly is a difference between our likelihood of success in ascertaining that meaning in the two cases. This crucial distinction was seen most clearly by James R. Baron;¹⁵ but whereas he used it to argue that speculation about Socrates' meaning must be limited to the question of his own intention, I would suggest that in fact it works in precisely the opposite direction.

For even if we can be fairly sure that Socrates actually said these words, we must acknowledge that what he may have meant by them is quite unrecoverable. Of course, nothing can stop us from wishing to speculate about their meaning; but no kind of evidence imaginable will ever be available to decide the issue without arbitrariness. On the one hand, nothing we know about the speaker's previous life can guarantee one interpretation of his last words against another: the situation of dying is so different from that of living that we cannot be certain that the psychological tendencies of the one case will apply in the other. And, on the other hand, though in the case of every other kind of discourse we can always, in principle at least, ask the speaker afterwards just what he meant (as though his second utterance were not inevitably beset by the same hermeneutic difficulties as his first one), precisely the point about last words is that, by definition, one cannot receive an answer if one asks their speaker what he meant. Here, after assuring Socrates that his debt to Asclepius would be paid, Crito invites him, ἀλλ' ὅρα εἴ τι ἄλλο λέγεις (118a9–10) – in vain. So too, if Goethe did indeed call out 'Mehr Licht!' on his death-bed, was he celebrating the bright new domain to which at last he had gained access or anxiously asking that the shutters be opened as the clouds of darkness gathered around his head – or was

here for the authenticity of Socrates' words as reported by Plato, the anonymous referee for this journal and several of my friends are not convinced that they might not have been invented by Plato after all. If they are wrong, the central thesis of this paper still remains the most plausible solution; if they are right, it becomes virtually certain.

¹² That the *Phaedo* belongs to the period before the *Republic* is generally accepted, but its exact date is uncertain. R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedo* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 7, argues for 387 or shortly thereafter. G. R. Ledger, *Re-counting Plato: A Computer Analysis of Plato's Style* (Oxford, 1989), p. 224, places the *Phaedo* between the *Gorgias* (386) and the *Protagoras* (380?). M. Dixsaut, *Platon: Phédon* (Paris, 1991), pp. 26–8, suggests about 383–382. H. Thesleff, *Studies in Platonic Chronology* (Helsinki, 1982), pp. 140–4 and 237, sets it as late as 380–375. For a helpful survey of the history of attempts to determine the sequence of Plato's dialogues, see now L. Brandwood, *The Chronology of Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge, 1990).

¹³ So e.g. Wilamowitz, op. cit., ii. 58–9. Such an interpretation can be supported by reference to other passages in the same text which emphasize Socrates' piety, e.g. 60e1–61b7, 85b3–7, 117c1–3; the ring-composition between the beginning and the end of the dialogue is thereby strengthened, see above, n. 8 and below, n. 69. But of course this explanation cannot exhaust the meaning of Socrates' words for Plato, as it cannot explain why Socrates' piety should be demonstrated with reference to Asclepius in particular rather than in any other way. Wilamowitz writes, 'Charakteristisch ist, worauf seine letzten Gedanken gerichtet sind, das Spezielle daran ist ganz ohne Belang' (op. cit., i. 178 n. 1): but in interpretation it is precisely the particular that matters in the end.

¹⁴ Yet so Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* 3.20.16–17, *Int. Epit.* 32.4–5.

¹⁵ Baron, op. cit.

he merely trying to complain in the local dialect of Frankfurt that he was lying uncomfortably?¹⁶ This will doubtless be one of the very first questions some of us will want to ask him when we meet him in the next world. In the meantime, we might more productively pursue other avenues of inquiry.

For although speculating about Socrates’ intention is idle, the same does not hold for Plato’s. For Socrates’ words are not only linked with a particular event of the year 399 B.C. by the likelihood that Plato has reported them accurately; they also form part of a complex literary text written by Plato, and there is no reason to believe that they were not also intended to enter into determinate relationships with other parts of that text and with other texts by the same author. Plato does not explicitly offer an exegesis of Socrates’ words in the *Phaedo*; but if we consider his elegance and sophistication as a writer, we might more reasonably expect him, if he did indeed favour some one interpretation of them, to have suggested it indirectly, by means of hints and allusions. Thus, in investigating the meaning of Socrates’ words, we would do well to take account not only of such general features as the Greek language, the history of philosophy, and so on, but also of the more or less concealed indications Plato has scattered throughout his text. In doing so, we shall not be speculating about what Socrates’ last words might have meant to Socrates, but rather hypothesizing about what they might have meant to Plato – and about what he might have intended them to mean to us.

Since antiquity, putative solutions have not been lacking.¹⁷ A few ancient authors who refer to Socrates’ last words offer no explanation of their meaning;¹⁸ and in modern times it has even been suggested that they have none (on the supposition that Socrates must have been delirious)¹⁹ or that he was simply joking²⁰ or being ironic.²¹ But most readers of the *Phaedo*, then as now, seem to have thought that the cock for

¹⁶ For the divergent *testimonia*, see W. Herwig (ed.), *Goethes Gespräche*, i–v (Zurich and Munich, 1965–87), iii. 2, pp. 882–9, 902, nr. 7014–19, 7031; for commentary on this point, see iv. 573 *ad* nr. 7014. The question of what Goethe’s last words really were is discussed by C. Schüddekopf (ed.), *Goethes Tod. Dokumente und Berichte der Zeitgenossen* (Leipzig, 1907), pp. 26ff.

¹⁷ A partial collection of ancient *testimonia* is provided by D. Wytttenbach (ed.), *ΠΛΑΤΩΝΟΣ ΦΑΙΔΩΝ. Platonis Phaedo*² (Leipzig, 1825), pp. 318–19 *ad* 118a; a more complete one, together with some recent *testimonia*, by J. L. Heiberg, ‘Socrates’ sidste Ord’, *Oversigt over det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskabs Forhandlinger* 1902: 4, pp. 105–16. I have not seen the following: H. F. Diez, ‘Über Sokrates’, *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 2 (1783), 281–6, 558–63; L. O. Lundgren, ‘Kriton, vi är skyldiga Asklepios en tupp’, *Studiekamraten* 54 (1972), 25–7; A. Wilder, ‘The Last Words of Socrates’, *The Platonist* 1 (1881), 39–42.

¹⁸ Lucian, *Bis accus.* 5; Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* 2.2, *De Anima* 1.6; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.4. Tertullian, *Apol.* 46.5 also suggests that Socrates wished to honour Apollo indirectly by sacrificing to his son – implausibly: for why then did Socrates not choose to honour Apollo directly?

¹⁹ R. Gautier, ‘Les Dernières Paroles de Socrates’, *Revue Universitaire* 64 (1955), 274–5. Such views have been criticized on medical grounds (Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 269; M. Del Re, ‘L’estremo voto di Socrate’, *Sophia* 25 (1957), 290–4, here 290–1), but it is impossible to know how much weight to give such kinds of evidence (cf. C. Gill, ‘The Death of Socrates’, *CQ* 67 (1973), 25–8, here 27–8).

²⁰ F. Hugo, *Cromwell*, ‘Préface’, in *Théâtre complet* 1 (Paris, 1963), p. 426.

²¹ F. Dirlmeier (ed.), *Platon: Phaidon* (Munich, 1959), p. 285 *ad loc.*; P. Friedländer, *Platon*. 1: *Eidos Paideia Dialogos* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1928), pp. 162–3 n. 2; J. Mitscherling, ‘*Phaedo* 118: The Last Words’, *Apeiron* 29 (1985), 161–5; W. H. D. Rouse, *Greek Votive Offerings: An Essay in the History of Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1902), p. 204 n. 3. Such an interpretation merely acknowledges the discrepancy between the apparent meaning of Socrates’ words and their dramatic context, without indicating why there should be such a discrepancy or what we should take its meaning to be; and in any case this view is precluded by the grammar of Socrates’ words (see below, n. 63).

Asclepius had a serious and ascertainable meaning. Despite the bewildering variety of solutions that have been proposed to the enigma, the vast majority can be divided into two groups.

1. By far the most common interpretation in the past two centuries has been allegorical and mystical: Socrates is thanking Asclepius for healing him of the sickness of life by the cure of death. Among ancient authors, this interpretation is attested only once, in a scholium to this passage by the Neoplatonist Damascius: *διὰ τὴν Ἀσκληπιῶ τὸν ἀλεκτρυόνα ἀποδίδωσιν; – ἢ ἵνα τὰ νεοοσηκότα τῆς ψυχῆς ἐν τῇ γενέσει ταῦτα ἐξιάσῃται.*²² But it rose to popularity in two modern periods in which Neoplatonism itself once again became an important intellectual influence: once in the Italian Renaissance, when Pico della Mirandola, Marsiglio Ficino, and Lodovico Ricchieri further developed Damascius' line of interpretation;²³ and again in the Romantic period, when writers as diverse as Hamann, Lamartine and Nietzsche shared this general view (however much they might have disagreed with one another about its details).²⁴ In one form or another, this is the interpretation which is to be found in most modern scholarly treatments of the question.²⁵

²² L. G. Westerink (ed.), *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, Vol. II, *Damascius* (Amsterdam, Oxford and New York, 1977), p. 285 (95' = 561); another scholium by the same author perhaps points in the same direction, p. 371 (9νζ' = 157): *διὰ τὴν ὀφείλειν ἔφ' ἣν τῷ Ἀσκληπιῶ τὴν θυσίαν καὶ τοῦτο τελευταῖον ἐφθέγγετο; ... ἢ ὅτι Παιωνίου δέεται προνοίας ἢ ψυχῇ, ἀλλὰ λατομένη τῶν πολλῶν πόνων.* Damascius' explanations are transmitted anonymously and used to be assigned to Olympiodorus; for the attribution to Damascius, now generally accepted, see L. G. Westerink (ed.), *Damascius: Lectures on the Philebus* (Amsterdam, 1959), pp. xv–xx, and Westerink, op. cit., pp. 15–17.

²³ See Heiberg, op. cit., pp. 108–9.

²⁴ F. Blanke and K. Gründer (eds.), *Johann Georg Hamanns Hauptschriften Erklärt*, iii. *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten*, ed. F. Blanke (Gütersloh, 1959), pp. 183–4; A. de Lamartine, 'La Mort de Socrate', in M.-F. Guyard (ed.), *Œuvres poétiques complètes* (Paris, 1963), pp. 85–108; F. Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Viertes Buch, §340 'Der sterbende Sokrates,' = G. Colli and M. Montinari (eds.), *Nietzsche, Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, v. 2 (Berlin and New York, 1973), pp. 249.15–250.6, and *Götzen-Dämmerung*, 'Das Problem des Sokrates', = *ibid.* vi. 3, pp. 61–7. On Nietzsche and Socrates, see W. J. Dannhauser, *Nietzsche's View of Socrates* (Ithaca and London, 1974).

²⁵ e.g. R. D. Archer-Hind (ed.), *ΠΛΑΤΩΝΟΣ ΦΑΙΔΩΝ. The Phaedo of Plato*² (London, 1894), p. 146 ad lin. 12; R. S. Bluck (ed.), *Plato's Phaedo* (London, 1955), p. 143 n. 1; Burnet, op. cit., p. 147 ad 118a7; J. L. Carafides, 'The Last Words of Socrates', *ΠΛΑΤΩΝ* 23 (1971), 229–32; A. Capuder, 'Note complémentaire au dernier mot de Socrate', *Ziva Antika* 19 (1969), 21–3, here 23; F. Cumont, 'A propos des dernières paroles de Socrate', *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* 1943: 112–26, here 121–6; Dixsaut, op. cit., pp. 180 and 408–9 n. 382; M. Del Re, op. cit., pp. 293–4; R. Del Re, 'Il gallo dovuto da Socrate ad Esculapio', *A&R* 14–16 (1954), 85–6; E. J. and L. Edelstein, *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies*, i–ii (Baltimore, 1945), ii. 130–1; Gill, op. cit., 27–8; Gnifka, op. cit., pp. 9–10; Heiberg, op. cit., pp. 115–16; C. Kerényi, *Asklepios: Archetypal Image of the Physician's Existence*, trans. R. Mannheim (Princeton, 1959), p. 59; R. Loriaux, *Le Phédon de Platon: commentaire et traduction*, vol. ii. 84b–118a (Namur, 1975), p. 162 ad 118a; R. Minadeo, 'Socrates' Debt to Asclepius', *CJ* 66 (1970/1), 294–7, here 296–7; G. Reale (ed.), *Platone: tutti gli scritti* (Milan, 1991), p. 130 n. 143; L. Robin (ed.), *Platon: Œuvres complètes*, iv. 1. *Phédon* (Paris, 1926), 102 n. 3, and *Platon: Œuvres complètes*, i–ii (Paris, 1940–2), i. 1334 n. 215; D. Tarrant, 'Metaphors of Death in the *Phaedo*', *CR* n.s. 2 (1952), 64–6, here 66; P. Vicaire (ed.), *Platon: œuvres complètes*, iv. 1. *Phédon* (Paris, 1983), p. 110 n. 1; C. J. de Vogel, *Pythagoras and Early Pythagoreanism: An Interpretation of Neglected Evidence on the Philosopher Pythagoras* (Assen, 1966), p. 185; M. Wohlrab (ed.), *Platons ausgewählte Schriften für den Schulgebrauch erklärt*. vi. *Phaedon*⁴ (Leipzig-Berlin, 1933), p. 163 ad 2; Wyttenbach, op. cit., p. 319 ad 118a (but in the first edition, Leiden 1810, p. 333 ad loc., he had rejected this view as a 'mystica interpretatio aliena illa ab hac Platonis narratione'); B. Zehnppennig (ed.), *Plato: Phaidon* (Hamburg, 1991), p. 206 n. 210.

In general, the impulse towards allegoresis derives from the sense of an apparent discrepancy in the surface of the text and operates not by resolving this discrepancy but by transposing it from within the text's literal meaning to a newly established gap between that level of signification and another, figural one. So too here: the dramatic incongruity of Socrates' speaking of a debt to Asclepius under these circumstances is redescribed as a conceptual incongruity. Normally, Asclepius heals from life-threatening illnesses, wards off death, and restores life: here, on the other hand, life itself must be interpreted as being an illness so that Asclepius, warding it off, can deliver Socrates to – not life, but rather death, understood as a new and better life. This is indeed paradoxical:²⁶ after all, the hero Asclepius was famous in myth for having restored a dead man to life, not vice versa;²⁷ throughout all antiquity the ill addressed prayers and sacrifices to him in the hope of being rescued from death, not from life;²⁸ at his temples it was forbidden to die within the sacred enclosure.²⁹ To accept an interpretation of Socrates' words so much at variance with such well-established cultural facts, we would need to support it with cogent evidence. Does the textual context of the *Phaedo* provide any?

(a) Unsurprisingly, Socrates often has occasion to speak about life and death in the course of the dialogue: but nowhere does he ever adopt the view that life is an illness or that death is its cure. Commentators and translators sometimes mistake Socrates' use of the terms *ἀναπίμπλημι* and *ἀνάπλεως* on two occasions to describe the effect upon the soul of its association with the body³⁰ to be a medical metaphor, and speak of 'contagion' or 'infection';³¹ but the fact that in both passages Socrates contrasts the term in question with *καθαρεύω* or *καθαρῶς* indicates that the register involved is in fact not medical but religious, and that a more accurate rendering would be 'pollution' or 'contamination'.³² Throughout the *Phaedo*, Socrates speaks of death

²⁶ It is so much so that we may perhaps excuse Wilamowitz for his peremptory declaration, 'das Leben ist keine Krankheit, und Asklepios heilt kein Übel der Seele... was hat der Heilgott mit dem Sterben zu tun? Wo erscheint er in einer ähnlichen Rolle? Wozu so weit schweifen?' (op. cit., ii. 57, 58) – but not J. Stenzel for the terms in which he endorses 'v. Wilamowitz' wichtige Richtigstellung billigen ungriechischen Tiefsinns' (*RE* III A 1 (Stuttgart, 1927), s.v. Sokrates [Philosoph], pp. 826–7): for genuine Greek examples, cf. Damascius' scholia, quoted above, and *Phaedo* 95d1–4, discussed below.

²⁷ Pind. *P.* 3.55–7; Aesch. *Ag.* 1022–4; Eur. *Alc.* 127–9; Pherecydes, *FGH Hist.* 3 F 35a; etc. So too in Plato: *Rep.* 3.408b–c. On the relation between the myth of Asclepius and his cult functions, see now C. Benedum, 'Asklepios – der homerische Arzt und der Gott von Epidauros', *RhM* 133 (1990), 210–27.

²⁸ Much of the material is helpfully collected and discussed in Edelstein and Edelstein, op. cit.

²⁹ Paus. 2.27.1, 6.

³⁰ 67a2–6: καὶ ἐν ᾧ ἂν ζῶμεν, οὕτως, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἐγγυτάτῳ ἐσόμεθα τοῦ εἰδέναι, ἐὰν ὅτι μάλιστα μηδὲν ὀμιλῶμεν τῷ σώματι μηδὲ κοινωνῶμεν, ὅτι μὴ πᾶσα ἀνάγκη, μηδὲ ἀναπιμπλόμεθα τῆς τούτου φύσεως, ἀλλὰ καθαρεύωμεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, ἕως ἂν ὁ θεὸς ἀπολύσῃ ἡμᾶς. 83d7–10: ἐκ γὰρ τοῦ ὁμοδοξεῖν τῷ σώματι καὶ τοῖς αὐτοῖς χαίρειν ἀναγκάζεται οἶμαι ὁμότροπος τε καὶ ὁμότροφος γίνεσθαι καὶ οἷα μηδέποτε εἰς Ἄιδου καθαρῶς ἀφικέσθαι, ἀλλὰ αἰεὶ τοῦ σώματος ἀναπλέα ἐξιέναι...

³¹ So e.g. Bluck, op. cit., p. 51 ad 67a ('infect'), but cf. p. 83 ad 83a ('contaminated'); Burnet, op. cit., p. 37 ad 67a5 ('nor suffer the contagion of'), but cf. p. 77 ad 83d10 ('contaminated', 'tainted'); E. Des Places, *Platon: œuvres complètes*, xiv. *Lexique* (Paris, 1964), i. 43 s.v. ἀναπιμπλάναι 'infecter'; Hackforth, op. cit., p. 48 ad 67a ('bodily infection'), but cf. p. 93 ad 83d ('taint'); LSJ s.v. ἀναπίμπλημι II. 2, ἀνάπλεως II.

³² This is well seen by R. Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 281–2. The usage was understood in antiquity, cf. Timaeus Soph. s.v. ἀνάπλεως ἀναπεπλησμένος: χρῆται δὲ ἐπὶ τοῦ μεμολυσμένου. Cf. also e.g. Dixsaut, op. cit., p. 217 ad 67a ('contaminant'), p. 250 ad 83d ('infectée', but cf. p. 357 n. 186 ad loc.); R. Loriaux, *Le Phédon de Platon: commentaire et traduction*, vol. i. 57a–84b (Namur and Gembloux, 1969), p. 91 ad 67a ('contaminé').

as a change of place or as a release from prison or as a military foe;³³ nowhere does he employ language that would support the mystical interpretation of his last words. So too, enlarging the context: elsewhere in Plato, Socrates sometimes uses these metaphors,³⁴ sometimes others;³⁵ he never uses this paradoxical medical one. Indeed, even if we cast our contextual nets more widely still, we shall scarcely find parallels³⁶ until Late Antiquity, when Hermes Trismegistus could entrust to a new and very different Asclepius a doctrine of the salvation of the soul,³⁷ and when some other texts, mostly Orphic and Neoplatonic, could perhaps point in the same direction.³⁸ Only now could Asclepius become responsible not only for bodily health in this world but also for spiritual health in the next³⁹ – and only now could Damascius interpret Socrates' last words allegorically. All our evidence suggests that in Socrates' time such a notion was inconceivable.

³³ See especially Tarrant, *op. cit.*; also D. O'Brien, 'The Last Argument of Plato's *Phaedo*, I and II', *CQ* n.s. 17 (1967), 198–231 and 18 (1968), 95–106, and 'A Metaphor in Plato: "Running Away" and "Staying Behind" in the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus*', *CQ* n.s. 27 (1977), 297–9.

³⁴ Life is a prison: *Phd.* 62b, cf. *Crat.* 400c. Death is separation of body and soul: *Phd.* 64c, cf. *Gorg.* 524b. Death is a migration: cf. *Apol.* 40c, 40e–41c.

³⁵ *σῶμα/σῆμα*: *Crat.* 400c, *Gorg.* 493a. Death is a dreamless sleep: *Apol.* 40c–e. See in general, C. J. de Vogel, 'The *SŌMA-SĒMA* Formula: Its Function in Plato and Plotinus Compared to Christian Writers', in H. J. Blumenthal and R. A. Markus (eds.), *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in Honour of A. H. Armstrong* (London, 1981), pp. 79–95.

³⁶ The only fairly close one I know of is provided by Aristotle (*Eudemus* Frag. 5 Ross = Frag. 41 Rose³ = Proclus in *Remp.* 2.349.13–26 Kroll); but it is an open question how far the formulation, and indeed even the content, of this fragment have been influenced by its Neoplatonic source, and in any case it scarcely suffices to support the mystical interpretation of Socrates' words. Nothing else even remotely similar is attested for Classical Greek literature, not even among the Pythagoreans, on whom see W. Burkert, *Weisheit und Wissenschaft. Studien zu Pythagoras, Philolaos und Platon* = *Erlanger Beiträge zur Sprach- und Kunstwissenschaft* 10 (Nürnberg, 1962), esp. pp. 98–142, pp. 271ff. Of course, in poetry those suffering intolerable pain can ask for death to come as a release from their torments (*Θάνατος Παιάν*, Aesch. *Frg.* 255, *Eur. Hipp.* 1373); but Plato takes care to make clear that Socrates is not in pain, and anyway Socrates is expressing gratitude, not uttering a prayer (see below).

³⁷ *Corpus Hermeticum* 2, 6, 9, 14; *Asclepius*.

³⁸ Most of the late evidence, such as it is, is inconclusive. Thus Artemidorus 5.61 recounts that a man who dreamed that Asclepius killed him by striking him in the belly with a sword was later healed by abdominal surgery (but this is salvation in this life, not in the next one); at 5.13 a boy wrestler who dreams that he is rejected by Asclepius dies before the contest, *ὁ γὰρ θεὸς οὐ τοῦ ἀγώνος ἀλλὰ τοῦ ζῆν, οὐπερ εἶναι κριτῆς νομίζεται, ἐξέβαλεν αὐτόν* (but the god of healing can certainly choose to refrain in hopeless cases, cf. e.g. Aristides, *Or.* 28.132). Orph. *H.* 37 concludes *ἐλθέ, μάκαρ, σωτήρ, βιοτῆς τέλος ἐσθλὸν ὁπάζων* (8); but cf. 3–4: *μόλοις κατάγων ὑγίειαν / καὶ παύων νούσους, χαλεπὸς κῆρας θανάτοιο*. Porphyry, *Ad Marcellam* 34 (296.8–10) provides only a partial parallel: *πολλὰκις κόπτουσι τινα μέρη ἐπὶ σωτηρίᾳ (τῶν λοιπῶν) σὺ δ' ἐπὶ σωτηρίᾳ τῆς ψυχῆς εἶμιμος ἔσο τὸ δὸν σῶμα ἀποκόπτει* (296.8–10 Nauck, with Nauck's supplement). Proclus is said to have had a close, indeed intimate relation with Asclepius (Marinus, *Vita Procli* 29–31): yet he used it to save a girl from a deadly illness, and when he himself was dying he had to combat, by the strength of his own desire for death, Asclepius' attempts to save his life. Even Plotinus' last words (Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 2.25–7), which used until recently to be interpreted as a statement that Plotinus in his death was trying to bring the divine in him up to the divine in the universe, are nowadays read differently, as an admonition to those interested in philosophy to try during their lives to bring up the divine in them to the divine in the universe (precisely what Plotinus, who is dying, can no longer do): see especially H.-R. Schwyzer, 'Plotinus letztes Wort', *MH* 33 (1976), 85–97, who proposes the text *φήσας* "πειράσθε τὸν ἐν ἡμῖν θεὸν ἀνάγειν πρὸς τὸ ἐν τῷ παντὶ θεῖον", cf. P. Henry, 'La Dernière Parole de Plotin', *SCO* 2 (1953), 113–30, and J. Igal, 'Una nueva interpretación de la últimas palabras de Plotino', *Cuadernos de Filología Clásica* 4 (1972), 441–62.

³⁹ See in general Edelstein and Edelstein, *op. cit.*, ii. 125–38.

(b) But not only does the Socrates of Plato’s *Phaedo* provide no positive evidence to support such an interpretation of his last words: in one passage he also provides some powerful negative evidence against it.⁴⁰ After having dealt with the criticisms of Simmias, Socrates turns to Cebes, whose views he recapitulates (95bff.). For Cebes, according to Socrates, the proof that the soul is strong and divine and existed before our birth does not entail that it is immortal as well. Then Socrates adds,

ἀλλὰ γὰρ οὐδέν τι μᾶλλον ἢν ἀθάνατον, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ εἰς ἀνθρώπου σῶμα ἐλθεῖν ἀρχὴ ἢν αὐτῇ ὀλέθρου, ὥσπερ νόσος· καὶ τάλαιπωρομένη τε δὴ τοῦτον τὸν βίον ζῶν καὶ τελευτῶσα γε ἐν τῷ καλούμένῳ θανάτῳ ἀπολλύοιτο. (95c9–d4)

The view Socrates attributes here to Cebes is admittedly not quite identical with the one the mystical interpretation assigns to his own last words: here dying is the soul’s final destruction, there it is its cure. Nevertheless, the similarity between the two views – in both cases the life of the soul in the body in this world is a disease – is much more striking than the difference, and is close enough to raise serious problems for the mystical interpretation. For after this passage Socrates goes on, at considerable length and in great detail, to attempt to establish the immortality of the soul and to set to rest Cebes’ doubts (95e–107a). At the end, Cebes is entirely convinced: οὐκ οὐκ ἔγωγε, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἔφη, ἔχω παρὰ ταῦτα ἄλλο τι λέγειν οὐδέ πῃ ἀπιστεῖν τοῖς λόγοις (107a2–3).⁴¹ It would be strange indeed if at the very end of his life Socrates should suddenly adopt a view much like one he himself had criticized earlier with such success that even its proponent had confessed that he was obliged by Socrates’ arguments to abandon it.

(c) Not only does the context of the dialogue speak strongly against the mystical interpretation of Socrates’ last words: examined closely, they do too. Much confusion has been caused by the curious tendency of certain scholars to regard them as a prayer directed to Asclepius, designed to solicit his benevolent intervention.⁴² Of course, if Socrates were in fact referring to his own death, he might well have uttered a prayer in his last moments in the hope that he would die gently. This is clearly how Damascius understood Socrates’ words.⁴³ But the language Socrates uses shows he can only be referring, not to the (immediate) future, but to the (immediate or more remote) past: he is not praying for a divine intervention which has not yet occurred, but thanking Asclepius for a divine intervention which the god has already performed. ὀφείλω denotes a situation of obligation deriving from a previous benefit:⁴⁴ in the *do ut des* relation typical of ancient religiosity, one can only ‘owe’ a

⁴⁰ This point is recognized by D. Gallop, *Plato: Phaedo* (Oxford, 1975), p. 225 *ad* 118a7–8 (who also suggests, with somewhat less cogency, that the mystic interpretation is incompatible with Socrates’ argument in 90e2–91a1); and Minadeo, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

⁴¹ Simmias is permitted to utter a residual doubt (107a9–b3), but only so that Socrates can respond with a myth of the after-life (107c–114d).

⁴² So e.g. Archer-Hind, *loc. cit.*; P. M. Clark, ‘A Cock to Asclepius’, *CR* n.s. 2 (1952), 146; Cumont, *op. cit.*, pp. 121–4; Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁴³ Damascius, *loc. cit.*, pp. 285 (ἵνα τὰ νεοσηκῶτα τῆς ψυχῆς ἐν τῇ γενέσει ταῦτα ἐξίσσηται), 371 (ὅτι Παιωνίου δεῖται προνοίας ἢ ψυχῇ, ἀπαλλαττομένη τῶν πολλῶν πόνων). So too Prudentius, *Apotheosis* 204–6: quamuis promittere et ipsi / gallinam soleant aut gallum, clinicus ut se / dignetur praestare deus morientibus aequum.

⁴⁴ The verb recurs in a similar context elsewhere in Plato (μηδ’ αὖ ὀφείλοντα ἢ θεῷ θυσίαν τινὰς ἢ ἀνθρώπῳ χρήματα, *Rep.* 1.331b) and in Callimachus (τὸ χρέος ὡς ἀπέχεις, Ἀσκληπιέ, τὸ πρὸ γυναικὸς / Δημοδίκης Ἀκέσων ὠφελεν αὐξάμενος, / γινώσκειν, Ep. 54.1–3 Pf.); cf. also Soph. *Ant.* 331, Theocr. 2.130. Hence a future obligation would derive from a hypothesized future-perfect benefit: ὥστε τῷ Ἀπόλλωνι ἄλλα μοι δοκῶ χαριστήρια ὀφειλήσειν, Xen. *Cyrop.* 7.2.28.

votive offering if the god has already intervened;⁴⁵ beforehand one can 'promise' but one cannot 'owe'.⁴⁶ Socrates' words, therefore, refer to the *ἵατρα* or *χαριστήρια* common in inscriptions and other texts recording gratitude to Asclepius for healings already performed: *τεθεράπευσαι, χρή δὲ ἀποδιδόναι τὰ ἵατρα*.⁴⁷ But he can obviously not be thinking of his own death if Asclepius' benevolence must already have been manifested before he utters these words: for whether the god had aided Socrates at the moment of his death or not could be known only after Socrates had already died⁴⁸ – to utter thanks beforehand would be impertinent, if not impious. Hence Socrates is in fact the only character in the *Phaedo* who could not possibly express gratitude to Asclepius for assistance at his death, for to utter his last words he must still be alive, but to feel gratitude to Asclepius he must already be dead. Even last words are not so late.

2. Thus in principle Wilamowitz's vigorous protest against this view⁴⁹ turns out to be justified: Socrates' votive offering to Asclepius must express gratitude not for his own death but for someone's rescue from illness. Though this seems to have been the dominant interpretation in antiquity,⁵⁰ few modern authors have adopted it.⁵¹ The reasons for this reluctance are not far to seek. It seems very odd that Socrates should first take the poison and only then arrange for the vow to be paid: why did he not do things in the reverse order? And the immediate dramatic context does not specify what vow in particular Socrates might mean, so that the choice of any particular candidate seems arbitrary.

(a) One ancient source combined Plato's report that Socrates had participated in the Athenian defeat at the battle of Delion⁵² with the hypothesis that the cure provided by Asclepius had been performed upon Socrates, and succeeded thereby in inventing a vow by Socrates himself for recovery after the battle: *ὥς δ' ἔπινε τὸ φάρμακον, ἐπέστελλεν ἡμῖν τῷ Ἀσκληπιῷ θῦσαι ἀλεκτρυόνα· ὀφείλειν γὰρ αὐτῷ κατ' εὐχὴν τινα, ὅποτε ἡσθένει ἀφικόμενος ἀπὸ τῆς ἐπὶ Δηλίῳ μάχης*.⁵³ Alas, the battle of Delion took place in 424 B.C.: it is hard to believe that the pious Socrates neglected for a quarter of a century to fulfil a vow made for his very own rescue.⁵⁴ Moreover, no source suggests that Socrates was injured or became ill during the

⁴⁵ Cf. W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. J. Raffan (Cambridge, MA, 1985), pp. 68–70; Rouse, op. cit., pp. 204f. on thank-offerings to Asclepius, and cf. pp. 97, 191, 203, 350–1, and *passim*.

⁴⁶ At Artemidorus 5.66, a dream is said to have meant *δεῖν φυλάττεσθαι καὶ θύειν ἀποτρόπαια τῷ θεῷ: δεῖν, not ὀφείλειν*.

⁴⁷ *IG* iv², 1.126 (c. 160 A.D.). Cf. e.g. *IG* 14.967a and b (II–III A.D.); Herodas, *Mim.* 4.15–18; *Suda* A.3893 s.v. Ἀρίσταρχος (1.352.1–3 Adler = Aelian Frg. 101 Hercher); and Edelstein and Edelstein, op. cit., 1.294–306, T. 520–45. Indeed, a man who sacrificed before he had been healed could even come to seem suspect: Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 1.10.

⁴⁸ Indeed, Reale, loc. cit., is even driven to the desperate suggestion, 'Si noti come queste parole sembrano venire dall'oltretomba... Platone fa dare a Socrate, come ultimo messaggio, la conferma che quanto aveva sempre sostenuto era esatto, ossia che stava passando alla nuova e vera vita.'

⁴⁹ Wilamowitz, op. cit., i. 178 n. 1, ii. 57–9.

⁵⁰ Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* 3.20.16–17, *Inst. Epit.* 32.4–5; Theodoret, *Graec. aff. cur.* 7.47; Damascius, op. cit., p. 371; *Socratis et Socraticorum Epistola* 14.9 (621 Hercher); Scholia ad Lucian *Bis accus.* 5 (138.14–17 Rabe); *Suda* σ.829 s.v. Σωκράτης (4.405.11–12 Adler).

⁵¹ e.g. Clark, loc. cit.; Gallop, loc. cit.; J. Geffcken, *Griechische Literaturgeschichte*, 2 (Heidelberg, 1934), pp. 88–9 n. 92; G. Grote, *Plato, and the Other Companions of Socrates*³ (London, 1852), 2.195 n. d.; Hackforth, op. cit., p. 190 n. 2; Wilamowitz, loc. cit.

⁵² Plato, *Apol.* 28e, *Lach.* 181b, *Symp.* 221a–b.

⁵³ *Socratis et Socraticorum Epistola* 14.9 (621 Hercher).

⁵⁴ Cf. Wilamowitz, op. cit., ii. 58 n. 1.

retreat.⁵⁵ And why should Socrates think of this vow just now? The sole advantage of this interpretation – that it lets Socrates refer to a cure performed upon himself – is far outweighed by its intrinsic implausibility.

(b) Wilamowitz, with a very Prussian sense of familial responsibility, suggested that while Socrates had been conversing with his wife and children, he had forgotten to mention a vow which concerned them:

Dabei fällt ihm ein, daß für irgendein Gelübde an den Heilgott, der erst vor zwanzig Jahren in Athen einen Kult erhalten hatte, noch das übliche Opfer ausstand. Er selbst wird den Zauberdienst nicht in Anspruch genommen haben, aber er hatte Weib und Kinder. ... Xanthippe oder eins der Kinder wird krank gewesen sein, einerlei, was es war. Es war eine geringfügige Sache für Sokrates, da hatte er es vergessen, als er draußen seine letzten Bestimmungen über diese irdischen Dinge traf.⁵⁶

The only advantages of this interpretation are that it remains closely linked to the immediate dramatic situation and that it explains the peculiar order of Socrates' actions by postulating that he simply forgot his vow and recalls it now when he ponders whether he is dying without debts. But otherwise it raises more problems than it solves: Socrates does not himself believe in Asclepius, yet not only accepts that his family does but even dies with Asclepius' name on his lips; Socrates cares enough about the illness of a relative to make a vow to Asclepius, yet not enough not to quite forget it when talking with his family; Socrates sends his family away so that he can die in the company of his disciples, yet he spends his last moments thinking of his family. Is Socrates being pious or hypocritical? Is his vow important or trivial? Is his first allegiance to his family or to his disciples? For Wilamowitz, it must in all cases be both at once: this is not Socrates' confusion, but Wilamowitz's.

(c) Might we take refuge in the weaker hypothesis that Socrates is thinking of some vow he has made, without our specifying the precise occasion?⁵⁷ Even this recourse is blocked, for any such notion that Socrates might be referring to a personal vow, whatever its nature, is precluded by a grammatical consideration which seems to have been overlooked by most commentators.⁵⁸ Socrates does not say, Ὡ Κρίτων, τῷ Ἀσκληπιῷ ὀφείλω ἀλεκτρύονα· ἀλλὰ ἀπόδος καὶ μὴ ἀμελήσης, but instead, Ὡ Κρίτων, τῷ Ἀσκληπιῷ ὀφείλομεν ἀλεκτρύονα· ἀλλὰ ἀπόδοτε καὶ μὴ ἀμελήσητε. Why does Socrates use the first- and second-person plural rather than the singular throughout the whole sentence? If ὀφείλομεν stood alone in the plural, we might perhaps be tempted to understand the first-person plural form as being equivalent to a singular;⁵⁹ if, on the contrary, Socrates had used the singular for himself but the plural for his interlocutors, we would have no difficulty understanding a personal vow on his part whose fulfilment was assigned to the sense of responsibility not of an individual but of the group as a whole. But the combination of the first-person plural verb with the two plural imperatives means that all the verbs can only be taken as genuine plurals. When, elsewhere in this scene, Socrates addresses a request to a single

⁵⁵ See especially *Symp.* 221b.

⁵⁶ Op. cit., i.178 n. 1, ii.58.

⁵⁷ So e.g. the ancient authors listed in n. 50 (except *Socratis et Socraticorum Epistola* 14.9), and among modern scholars Gallop, loc. cit., and Hackforth, op. cit., p. 190 n. 2.

⁵⁸ Exceptions: e.g. Cumont, op. cit., pp. 121–2; Dixsaut, op. cit., pp. 180 and 408–9 n. 382.

⁵⁹ So Gallop, loc. cit., referring to 116d4. But in Greek prose this construction is relatively rare: cf. Kühner–Gerth, op. cit., ii. 1, pp. 83–4; E. Schwyzer, *Griechische Grammatik*, ii. *Syntax und syntaktische Stilistik* ⁴ (Munich, 1975), pp. 243–4. And in fact it seems best to take the words ἡμεῖς ταῦτα ποιήσομεν (116d4) too as a genuine plural referring to Socrates and his friends: for he goes on in his very next words to address his disciples (καὶ ἅμα πρὸς ἡμᾶς, *ibid.*) and to include them in his first-person plural exhortation to obey (πειθώμεθα, d8).

person, he uses the single imperative form;⁶⁰ on the other hand, when he uses the plural imperative he is speaking to the group of those of his disciples who are present,⁶¹ and when he uses the first-person plural he is denoting the group made up of himself and them.⁶² There is no reason not to presume that this is the case here as well. But if this is so, it follows that what is at stake cannot be merely some personal oath of Socrates', regarding himself or his family, but rather something that involves the group as a whole.⁶³

(d) Hence we must presume, first, that someone whose health was important to the group consisting of Socrates and his disciples had been so ill that Socrates thought that only Asclepius could save him, and, second, that nonetheless he had been saved. But who? It is the merit of Pamela M. Clark to have recognized that the *Phaedo* itself provides a single, unequivocal answer: Plato.⁶⁴ On the one hand we know from this text that Plato was ill at the time of Socrates' death, for in a passage near its beginning he has *Phaedo* explicitly tell Echecrates that Plato was absent and suggest that the reason was that he was sick:

ΕΧ. Ἐτυχον δέ, ὦ Φαίδων, τίνες παραγερόμενοι;
ΦΑΙΔ. Οὗτός τε δὴ ὁ Ἀπολλόδωρος τῶν ἐπιχωρίων παρὴν καὶ Κριτόβουλος καὶ ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐπὶ Ἑρμογένους καὶ Ἐπιγένης καὶ Αἰσχίνης καὶ Ἀντισθένης· ἦν δὲ καὶ Κτήσιππος ὁ Παιανιεύς καὶ Μενέξενος καὶ ἄλλοι τινὲς τῶν ἐπιχωρίων. Πλάτων δὲ οἶμαι ἡσθένει. (59b5–10)⁶⁵

Plato's is the only concrete case of illness mentioned anywhere in the dialogue.⁶⁶ Nor can we doubt that his illness must have been rather severe, for otherwise it is inconceivable that he would not have wished to be present at Socrates' last hours together with the other disciples. And on the other hand we know for a fact from the very existence of the *Phaedo* that in the end Plato recovered from this illness.

Plato's reference to his illness is brief: but no reader of the dialogue can forget it. For not only is it in itself remarkable that Plato, who was evidently very attached to Socrates and was present at his trial, should have failed to share Socrates' last hours with him, especially when so many other disciples did; nor can one fail to note the

⁶⁰ ἴσθι (115e4); χαίρε (116d4); ἴθι, πείθου, ποίει (117a3).

⁶¹ ἐγγυήσασθε (115d6, 9); ἄγετε, καρτερεῖτε (117e2).

⁶² ποιήσομεν (116d4: see above, n. 59); πειθώμεθα (116d8).

⁶³ This, if nothing else, would suffice to preclude the interpretation that Socrates was speaking ironically (see above, n. 21): the notion that Socrates might have been indulging at this moment in a piece of whimsy of this sort might, just conceivably, be tolerable if Socrates used the singular forms and thereby indicated that the vow regarded himself personally; with the plural forms, however, and the implication that it affects the group of himself and his disciples as a whole, it can no longer be maintained.

⁶⁴ Clark, *op. cit.*; but her views and mine diverge on a number of other points involving this identification. Cf. also R. Burger, *The Phaedo: A Platonic Labyrinth* (New Haven and London, 1984), p. 216. I have not seen W. H. D. Rouse, *Great Dialogues of Plato* (New York, 1956), p. 521, who seems to have made the same proposal (cited by Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 269 n. 5).

⁶⁵ Though scepticism is sometimes expressed concerning whether Plato was really sick or not (so even recently, e.g. W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 3. *The Fifth-Century Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 489 n. 2), Wilamowitz is probably right in arguing that the illness was genuine (*op. cit.*, i. 325 n. 1). If Plato invented his illness for the purposes of this dialogue and in fact was absent for some other reason, the probability attaching to the central thesis of this paper is enormously increased. But for the present argument what matters is not whether Plato's illness was real or fictional, but only the fact that it exists as a discursive reality within the *Phaedo* and hence forms part of the interpretative textual context for Socrates' last words.

⁶⁶ All other references in the dialogue to sickness are general and unspecific: cf. 66c1, 83c1, 86c4, 105c3–4, 110e6.

extraordinary contrast between, on the one hand, the presumable severity of Plato's illness and what we can easily imagine to have been his psychological state at the time, and, on the other, the extraordinary delicacy, concision, and irony of this indirect self-reference, coloured subtly as it is by the parenthetical *οἶμαι*.⁶⁷ What is more, the sentence alluding to Plato's illness is rendered emphatic by a number of striking features: in the lines cited, by the carefully constructed climactic structure which begins with a list of seven Athenian individuals and adds two more and then an unspecified plurality of other Athenians who were present but are left unnamed, before going on finally to add one more Athenian who was not present but is named, Plato; within the immediate context, by the double isolation of the reference to his absence, once rhetorically from the preceding list by the repetition of *τῶν ἐπιχωρίων*, and once semantically from the following list by the fact that this one names the foreigners present at Socrates' death; and within the global context of Plato's *œuvre* by the well-known fact that Plato names himself only thrice in his entire corpus, here and in two passages in the *Apology* (34a1, 38b6).⁶⁸ And Phaedo's reference to Plato's absence near the very end of the introductory section of the dialogue is linked by ring-composition with Socrates' expression of gratitude to Asclepius near the very end of its concluding section.⁶⁹ In the end, Plato turns out not to be absent from Socrates' dying hours after all, but – by a typically Platonic irony – where he is named it is to assert his absence, and where he is present he is not named: in a buried *sphragis*, Plato's hidden signature silently names him as the author of the *Phaedo*.

Whatever Socrates himself may have meant by his last words, then, there can be little doubt that Plato, by referring prominently to his own illness and by not referring at all to anyone else's, has constructed the *Phaedo* in such a way as to suggest that Socrates was thanking Asclepius for the recovery of Plato's health. To this interpretation it has been objected that Socrates may well have been told that Plato was sick but could not possibly have known that he had recovered: how then could he know that thank-offerings were due to Asclepius?⁷⁰ Such an objection presupposes that the only way Socrates could have learned of Plato's recovery was by someone's reporting it to him. But if someone could tell him that Plato had recovered, why could not Plato do so himself? And why does Socrates wait to thank Asclepius until he has drunk the poison? Surely Plato does not mean us to suppose that his recovery from a serious illness was a matter of such indifference to Socrates that it simply slipped his

⁶⁷ Plato himself, of course, knew perfectly whether he was ill or not at the time of Socrates' death. If he has *Phaedo* imply some uncertainty here, this is probably not because in fact there was some uncertainty on this score, but because it is dramatically appropriate for a messenger to restrict his expressions of certainty to those matters to which he can attest on the basis of personal observation: thereby our impression of his veracity concerning all other matters is strengthened. So too, explaining the absence of Aristippus and Cleombrotus, Phaedo says, *ἐν Αἰγίνῃ γὰρ ἐλέγοντο εἶναι* (59c4), and here too there is no reason to subscribe to the ancient view that Plato is expressing an implied criticism of them (Dem. *De Elocut.* 288). A further, interesting suggestion is made by the anonymous referee for this journal: 'Phaedo's vagueness about Plato's illness guarantees that he himself will have missed the real meaning of Socrates' last words, and thus reassures us that the allusion to Plato (when we eventually grasp it) is not Phaedo's own imposition on the story, but part of the facts he unwittingly reports.'

⁶⁸ This was already recognized as a peculiarity of Plato's works in antiquity: see Diog. Laert. 3.37.

⁶⁹ So too, both Socrates' first words in this dialogue (60a7–8) and his last words are imperatives addressed to Crito, directing him to ensure that others carry out Socrates' wishes; and the Athenians' pious observation of their vow to Apollo at the beginning (58b1–4) may correspond to Socrates' pious observation of a vow to Apollo's son Asclepius at the end. For other instances of ring-composition between these two sections of the dialogue, see above, nn. 8 and 13.

⁷⁰ M. Del Re, op. cit., p. 290; R. Del Re, op. cit., p. 85.

mind and only occurred to him at the very last moment. But any explanation of Socrates' words that presupposes that he knew about the obligation due to Asclepius before he drank the poison runs into precisely the same difficulty: the sequence, first the draught, then the words, remains unintelligible.

Here, as often, the best way to solve the problem is to turn it upside down and shake it. If Socrates did not learn of Plato's recovery before he drank the poison, he can only have done so afterwards: he must be referring to Asclepius not in spite of having drunk the poison, but because of having done so. For Plato's recovery from a dangerous illness is not something that Socrates has been told of, has then forgotten, and only now recalls: rather, it can only be something of which, at the very threshold of death, he experiences a clairvoyant vision.

It was a widespread belief in antiquity that those about to die possessed special clairvoyant and prophetic powers.⁷¹ When Patroclus is dying, he foretells Hector's death at the hands of Achilles; when Hector is dying, he returns the favour by foretelling Achilles' death at the hands of Paris and Apollo.⁷² Cicero's discussion of this phenomenon has a distinctively Platonic colouring:

Cum ergo est somno seuocatus animus a societate et a contagione corporis, tum meminit praeteritorum, praesentia cernit, futura providet; iacet enim corpus dormientis ut mortui, uiget autem et uiuit animus. Quod multo magis faciet post mortem, cum omnino corpore excesserit. Itaque adpropinquante morte multo est diuinior. ... Diuinare autem morientes illo etiam exemplo confirmat Posidonius ... Idque, ut modo dixi, facilius euenit adpropinquante morte, ut animi futura augerentur. (*De Divinatione* 1.30.63–5)⁷³

But there is no need to search so far afield for parallels. For Plato has taken care to have Socrates himself provide not one, but two. One occurs in a text linked by numerous associations with the *Phaedo*.⁷⁴ Towards the end of the *Apology*, after sentence of death has been passed upon Socrates, he addresses the jurors as follows:

τὸ δὲ δὴ μετὰ τοῦτο ἐπιθυμῶ ὑμῖν χρησμοδῆσαι, ὃ καταψηφισάμενοί μου· καὶ γὰρ εἰμι ἤδη ἐνταῦθα ἐν ᾧ μάλιστα ἄνθρωποι χρησμοδοῦσιν, ὅταν μέλλωσιν ἀποθανεῖσθαι. (*Apol.* 39c1–3)⁷⁵

And the other occurs at a critical moment in the *Phaedo* itself. After Socrates has finished his series of arguments for the immortality of the soul, Simmias and Cebes admit that they still have doubts but in view of the immediate situation are reluctant to express them; Socrates counters that, like that of Apollo's swan, his own final song is one of joy, not sorrow:

ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ αὐτὸς ἡγοῦμαι ὁμόδουλός τε εἶναι τῶν κύκνων καὶ ἱερὸς τοῦ αὐτοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ οὐ χεῖρον ἐκείνων τὴν μαντικὴν ἔχειν παρὰ τοῦ δεσπότου, οὐδὲ δυσθυμότερον αὐτῶν τοῦ βίου ἀπαλλάττεσθαι. (*Phd.* 85b4–7)

Such a claim for mantic powers in the middle of the *Phaedo* needs to be substantiated in some definite and unmistakable way, preferably elsewhere in the same text, if it is

⁷¹ The Greeks tended not to distinguish, as we do, between prophecy directed to events later in time and clairvoyancy directed to events distant in space. Archaic Greek prophets are said to know τὰ τ' ἐόντα τὰ τ' ἐσσόμενα πρό τ' ἐόντα (Hom. *Il.* 1.70, Hes. *Th.* 38, etc.); in Herodotus, Apollo at Delphi proves his mantic powers by revealing what Croesus is cooking at that very moment in Sardis (Hdt. 1.46–8).

⁷² *Il.* 16.843–54, 22.355–60. Cf. Schol. *ad Il.* 16.851–54, 854a, 22.359–60a; Eust. 1089.60 *ad Il.* 16.851–4; and e.g. Virg. *Aen.* 10.739–41, Servius *ad Aen.* 10.740, Servius (auctus) *ad Aen.* 4.613.

⁷³ Cf. also e.g. Xen. *Cyrop.* 8.7.21; Aristot. *Frg.* 10 Rose³.

⁷⁴ Other possible relations, of varying degrees of plausibility, between these two texts – the only ones in which Plato names himself – are proposed by A. Patzer, 'Platons Selbsterwähnungen', *Würzburger Jahrbücher* N.F. 6b (1980), 21–7.

⁷⁵ Cf. also Xen. *Apol.* 30.

not to seem hybriatic;⁷⁶ and we know from the *Apology* that according to Plato, Socrates thought that one likely moment for such mantic powers to be expressed is at the point of death. At the end of the *Apology*, when his death is indeed certain but not yet imminent, Socrates goes on to utter a *χρησµωδία* prophesying the fate of those who have condemned him (39c-d). So too, at the end of the *Phaedo*, when he is actually dying, he will utter a *χρησµωδία* proclaiming that Plato has been healed and that a thank-offering must be made to Asclepius. One foretells the condemnation of his enemies, the other announces the salvation of a friend; one tells of a punishment worse than death (*Apol.* 39c4-6), the other of a new life.

Thus, in his last moments, Socrates is not recalling something he has forgotten nor reminding the others of something they already know; instead he is making an announcement to them of news that his proximity to death has only now enabled him to receive himself.⁷⁷ That news concerns one member of the informal philosophical *ἐταιρία* to which Socrates and his disciples all belong and which is constituted by their shared love of philosophical disputation; one of the younger members, Plato, whose health would be as much a concern as any other member's to his *ἐταῖροι*, had been ill but has now recovered; the whole *ἐταιρία* owes Asclepius thanks. To be sure, a cock is a poor man's offering;⁷⁸ even in his dying moments Socrates remains true to the ideal of *αὐτάρκεια* which had characterized him throughout his life and which was to become a fixed element in his later reputation.⁷⁹ But there is no reason to suppose that the thanks are anything but sincere, and we can easily imagine what it must have meant to Plato to be able to suppose that the person whose health Socrates was concerned for, at the end of his own life, was not Socrates, nor anyone else, but Plato.

Perhaps, indeed, we can even go one step further in understanding Plato's view of the *ἐταιρία*'s gratitude to Asclepius. For gratitude would be due for the rescue of any of Socrates' *ἐταῖροι*; but Plato is not likely to have believed that he himself was simply one *ἐταῖρος* among others. If we consider the position of Plato within Socrates' *ἐταιρία*, then we may be able to see the work of salvation performed by Asclepius in a new light. On the one hand, the fact that Plato is saved may be meant to suggest that Socrates is not after all dying without a philosophical heir. One of Socrates' very last utterances to his group, in answer to Crito's question whether he had any final dispositions to make, had been a severe admonition that they continue in their lives and thoughts to follow the views expressed during the present colloquy and in the past (115b5-c1); and Crito, at least, provides an excellent example of someone who has

⁷⁶ Admittedly, the primary reference at *Phd.* 85b4-7 is to Socrates' preceding arguments concerning the fate of the soul, not to any words he might come to utter at the very point of death. But his dying words are even more truly his swan-song than those arguments; and whether his arguments were correct we shall not discover until after we have died ourselves, whereas the truth of his vision of Plato's recovery is immediately apparent. The veracity of the one prophecy may serve to make the other one seem more authoritative.

⁷⁷ There was a well-established connection between mantic visions and (often miraculous) medical cures in antiquity, cf. A. Brelich, *Gli eroi greci: un problema storico-religioso* (Rome, 1978), pp. 106-13, 113-18.

⁷⁸ Herodas 4.11-18, Libanius, *Orat.* 34.36; cf. W. Headlam, *Herodas: The Mimes and Fragments*, ed. A. D. Knox (Cambridge, 1922), p. 180 ad 4.16, and Rouse, *Offerings*, op. cit., pp. 204, 297. So too, in the Issenheim altar now in Colmar, Nicolas of Hagenau has sculpted within the altarpiece on the left a peasant who offers a cock, on the right a rustic gentleman who offers a piglet. Cocks are often associated with Asclepius anyway, see Artemidorus 5.9, Libanius, *Orat.* 34.36, *Suda* A.4177 s.v. *Ἀσκληιάζοντες* (1.385.19-23 Adler = Aelian *Fr.* 98 Hercher), A.1117 s.v. *ἀλεκτρούνα* (1.101.4-7 Adler), *IG* iv², 1.41 (c. 400 B.C.); and cf. F. Orth, 'Huhn', *RE* 8.2 (Stuttgart, 1913), p. 2533, and Cumont, op. cit., pp. 122 and n. 1, 124-6.

⁷⁹ See e.g. Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.1, 4, 3.5ff., 5.1ff., etc.

spent much time with Socrates, is deeply attached to his person – but has not the slightest grasp of his philosophy (115c4–116a1). For Socrates, a mistake in philosophy is bad not only for philosophy but for the soul as well: *εὖ γὰρ ἴσθι, ἥ δ' ὅς, ὦ ἀρίστε Κρίτων, τὸ μὴ καλῶς λέγειν οὐ μόνον εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο πλημμελές, ἀλλὰ καὶ κακὸν τι ἐμποιεῖ ταῖς ψυχαῖς* (115e4–6). He himself is dying and will not be able to protect his views (and thereby his disciples) in the future: but by envisioning Plato in his last moments and celebrating his recovery, he seems almost to be designating Plato as his legitimate successor, as the custodian of his arguments.⁸⁰ The *ἐταιρία* has indeed grounds for rejoicing: for by the rescue of Plato it has been rescued too: Socrates' philosophy will not be lost together with Socrates, but can be entrusted to a disciple worthy of it; the death of the oral philosopher founds Plato's written philosophy.⁸¹ And on the other hand, the rescue of the group may correspond to a deeper rescue of Plato himself. For on this view his recovery enjoins upon him responsibilities, to Socrates and to his philosophy, which he had not had before. Before this illness he had been just a disciple: now Socrates has legitimated him as his heir. Plato's second life, into which he has been reborn by Asclepius' intervention, must be dedicated more completely to philosophy than his first life had been. If Asclepius has saved him, it is so that he, by his philosophy, can save Socrates' arguments, Socrates' disciples – and us.⁸² As the author of Plato's seventh letter puts it, the single event that persuaded Plato to abandon his hopes of a political career and instead to direct all his energies to philosophy was the death of Socrates.⁸³

If this, or something like it, was indeed Plato's interpretation of Socrates' last words, then we cannot help but feel admiration for his tact and literary artistry.⁸⁴ He has not thought it necessary to emphasize the visionary nature of Socrates' last words by casting a mystical light upon the final scene:⁸⁵ indeed it was hardly necessary to do so, as it is not the physical details of the death itself that are remarkable but rather the connection between the words Socrates utters and a real event outside the

⁸⁰ So too, various ancient anecdotes about Plato record his miraculous legitimation as Socrates' successor: see A. S. Riginos, *Platonica: The Anecdotes Concerning the Life and Writings of Plato* (Leiden, 1976), Anecdote 4, pp. 21–4. This appears to be the suggestion also of Burger, loc. cit.

⁸¹ See J. Derrida, 'La Pharmacie de Platon', in *La Dissémination* (Paris, 1972), pp. 69–197, especially 137–46, 170, 177, 189, 194–5.

⁸² It may be of interest in this connection that there is a certain tendency in Late Antiquity to view Asclepius and Plato as brothers and counterparts: Diog. Laert. 3.45 (= Anth. Pal. 7.109.1–2); Olympiodorus, *Vita Platonis* 2.164–7, in L. G. Westerink (ed.), *Olympiodorus: Commentary on the First Alcibiades of Plato* (Amsterdam, 1956), p. 6; Anon. *Vita Platonis* 6.14–16, in L. G. Westerink (ed.), *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (Amsterdam, 1962), pp. 13–15; and cf. Riginos, op. cit., Anecdote 9, pp. 28–9.

⁸³ 325c5–d1: *σκοποῦντι δὴ μοι ταῦτά τε καὶ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τοὺς πράττοντας τὰ πολιτικά, καὶ τοὺς νόμους γε καὶ ἔθνη, ὅσω μᾶλλον διεσκόπουν ἡλικίας τε εἰς τὸ πρόσθε προὔβαινον, τοσούτῳ χαλεπώτερον ἐφαίνετο ὁρθῶς εἶναι μοι τὰ πολιτικά διοικεῖν*. This is not the place to attempt to decide whether this letter really is by Plato or not.

⁸⁴ H. Cherniss, 'Plato (1950–1957)', *Lustrum* 4 (1959), 5–308, here 132, dismisses Clark's solution (see above, n. 42) as 'tasteless'. Certainly *de gustibus non est disputandum*: but the suggestion that, in his final moments, Socrates was not congratulating himself upon his own rescue but thanking the god for his friend's, may well be defended as more tasteful rather than less so.

⁸⁵ But in this connection the striking alternation of veiling and unveiling in this scene is perhaps worth noting. It was common practice in antiquity to cover the face of the dead. But it also formed part of a mystic initiation to veil the face of the initiate who was purified in preparation for the mystic vision, see e.g. W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1987), pp. 94ff. It may also be noted in passing that the cock too had important symbolic meaning in the ancient mysteries: see Cumont, op. cit.

immediate situation.⁸⁶ But neither has he permitted Crito, Phaedo, Echecrates, or anyone else within the dialogue – or, for that matter, himself – to comment in any way upon Socrates’ words. A lesser writer (and I mean by that almost any other writer) could hardly have resisted the temptation to indicate explicitly that he understood Socrates’ last words to have expressed concern for his own welfare – in so doing, of course, not only ruining the dramatic effect of the closing scene but also making this very interpretation seem self-serving, heavy-handed, and implausible. Plato’s decision to suggest this interpretation so subtly was worthy of him. He could hardly have foreseen that, as a result, his meaning would apparently rest unperceived for centuries.⁸⁷

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⁸⁶ So too in the deaths of Patroclus and Hector in Homer (see above, n. 72), the process of death is described realistically, the final words are simply reported as such, and their prophetic character is not mentioned in any way in the text itself but is left instead to be discovered by the reader’s inference from his knowledge of the epic tradition.

⁸⁷ My suggestion that Plato might be trying to legitimate himself as Socrates’ philosophical heir can perhaps receive further support from indications that he may have been facing competition on this score. T. D. Barnes suggests to me that the fact that Plato has Crito ask Socrates if he has anything else to say (118a9–10), but then has Socrates die without answering the question, might be intended as an implicit refutation of other alleged “last words” of Socrates currently in circulation. And A. A. Long points out that in a passage in Xenophon’s *Symposium*, probably written a few years after the *Phaedo*, Socrates seems to designate Antisthenes as his philosophical heir, at least in certain regards (4.16). Many anecdotes concerning the mutual enmity between Plato and Antisthenes were told in antiquity (cf. Riginos, op. cit., Anecdotes 43–48 and 103, pp. 98–101 and 147–8): if they had any basis in fact, they may have arisen from rivalry for Socrates’ philosophical succession.