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SOCRATES' LAST WORDS: ANOTHER LOOK AT AN ANCIENT RIDDLE

Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. Pay it and do not neglect it.[1]

. . . it would be meaningless to speak of a Socratic philosophy apart from the teaching of Socrates.[2]

Socrates' last words are a microcosm of the riddle his character poses to the philosophical reader. Are they sincere or ironic? Do they represent an afterthought prompted by a belated sense of 'familial responsibility'[3] or a death-bed epiphany? Are we to determine their reference in relation to the surface logic of the *Phaedo* or take them as the sign of a concealed discursive depth? In what follows, I will argue that the answer to these questions depends upon acknowledgement and clarification of the pedagogical challenge Socrates faces in conversation with Simmias and Cebes. What I have to say is prompted, in large measure, by Glenn Most's recent article which both undertakes substantial analysis of the riddle's treatment by the tradition and develops a plausible solution.[4] I do not accept this solution. But the struggle to articulate my misgivings about his argument was indispensible to the development of my own. In view of this, it seems prudent to begin with a brief summary of the position he takes.

Most's reading of Socrates' last words emerges from a critique of what he sees as the dominant traditional alternatives. These, he claims, can be divided into two groups: on the one hand, the 'allegorical and mystical' (Most, p. 100), on the other, what we might call the sincere/personal (Most, p. 104).

The allegorical interpretation will be more familiar to Plato's modern audience. It consists in some form of the claim that 'Socrates is thanking Asclepius for healing him of the sickness of life by the cure of death' (Most, p. 104). Nietzsche's argument to this effect in elaborating 'the problem of Socrates' at the beginning of *Goetzendämmerung* is well known. But, Most says, it is to be found in a number of other Romantic writers (he mentions Hamann and Lamartine), in the Italian Renaissance (Mirandola, Ficino, and Ricchieri), and in an ancient commentary by Damascius (Most, p. 100, nn. 22, 24). The common thread here seems to be the intellectual currency of Neo-Platonism. In each case, the final utterance is taken together with the presumption that the motive force of Plato's philosophical project is the longing for transcendence (Most, p. 100, nn. 22, 24). The remarkable durability of this interpretation in contemporary scholarship—where the direct influence of Neo-Platonism is marginal at best—I take as evidence of a substantial residue of nineteenth-century thinking in classical studies generally and Plato studies in particular.

[1] *Phaedo* 118. All citations of Plato's text follow the Fowler translation, Loeb Classical Library, 36 (Cambridge, MA, 1990). Henceforth, only standarized line numbers will be provided as reference.

[2] P. Friedlaender, *Plato* (Princeton, 1958), p. 85.

[3] cf. G. Most, 'A cock for Asclepius', *CQ* 43 (1993), 96–111, 105. The phrase is used in reference to Wilamowitz's suggestion 'that while Socrates had been conversing with his wife and children, he had forgotten to mention a vow which concerned them'.

[4] Ibid. All citations of Most are taken from this article. Like him, I will leave aside the historical question of whether the words of the request Socrates makes at 118 were in fact his last words. I am interested only in their significance in Plato's text.

Most provides three arguments against the allegorical interpretation. The first is essentially stylistic: the images Socrates uses to characterize the relation between life and death throughout the *Phaedo* are religious and/or political, not medical (Most, pp. 101–2). In fact, the sort of reversal required for the medical allusion to work (life = disease, death = cure) is nowhere to be found in Plato and has virtually no parallel 'until Late Antiquity' (Most, p. 102). Damascius, looking back at the *Phaedo* through the filter of Orphic and Neo-Platonic doctrine, might well have thought he heard in Socrates' request the anticipation of a later *ethos*, but 'all our evidence suggests that in Socrates' time such a notion was inconceivable' (Most, p. 102).

The second argument turns on a question of internal consistency. At 95c9–d4, Socrates attributes to Cebes the view that the soul's entrance into the body is 'the beginning of its dissolution, a disease, as it were . . .' in the course of reconstructing his (i.e. Cebes') objection to the arguments for immortality advanced in the first part of the dialogue. That is to say, he assigns to Cebes a conception of life identical to that which the allegorical interpretation would assign to him. Admittedly, the conception of death is different—at 95d it represents the final destruction of the soul, at 118 its ostensible salvation—but, Most reasons, the positions are 'close enough to raise serious problems for the mystical interpretation' (Most, p. 103). After all, it is precisely the conceptions of life and death assumed in Cebes' objection that Socrates turns aside in the final stretch of the argument (95e–107a). Finding in that constellation even a partial refuge at the last moment 'would be strange indeed' (Most, p. 103).

Finally, there is the testimony of the words themselves. If Socrates *owes* (ὀφείλω) a cock to Asclepius, then the healing he acknowledges must already have taken place. And that fact alone rules the allegorical interpretation out of order.

> . . . 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 died—to utter thanks beforehand would be impertinent, if not impious. (Most, p. 104)

The sincere/personal interpretation of the last words, favoured by antiquity according to Most (p. 104), faces another problem. If Socrates means simply to thank Asclepius *in earnest* for showing him favour on a prior occasion, what might *that* have been? And how do we justify his neglect of it in the interim? Most rehearses a number of scenarios in response here which seem inherently unconvincing. But more to the point, the grammar of the utterance speaks against their common assumption. If the vow Socrates makes were strictly personal, he would surely have said: Ὦ Κρίτων, τῷ Ἀσκλεπιῷ ὀφείλω ἀλεκτρυόνα, ἀλλὰ ἀπόδος καὶ μὴ ἀμελέσῃς. That is to say, he would have used the first and second person singular forms (Most, pp. 105–6). As it is, he opts for the plural (ὀφείλομεν, ἀπόδοτε, ἀμελέσητε), implying very strongly that it is the group gathered in the cell which is indebted.

Attention to this point seems to me the genuine first step in elaborating a textually adequate reading of Socrates' last words. Although Most holds it in reserve as an argument against the sincere/personal interpretation, it is clearly fatal to those variations of the allegorical reading he examines for the same reason. Socrates' words to Crito are spoken on behalf of the company privy to the foregoing conversation. They are not simply the acknowledgement of a personal debt.

But where do we go from there? The moment we establish the proper frame of reference for Socrates' riddle we must choose again between a hermeneutics of sincerity and a hermeneutics of allegory *in describing the situation of the collective*. Is the debt that has been incurred *by the company* a result of Asclepius' intercession in

some real illness or is the recovery in question symbolic (i.e. metaphysical, philosophical)? For all his care in establishing the groundwork of his own proposal, Most does not address this question. Instead, he assumes that the arguments against the interpretation of Socrates' last words as an allegory of *his own* life and death are sufficient for dispatching the entire range of allegorical possibilities. That is to say, he assumes that the single option open to us, given the shortcomings of the traditional commentary, is to amend the sincerity thesis with a view to satisfying the requirements imposed on us by grammar and context:

> 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. (Most, p. 106)

In a moment, I will make some arguments against this presumption. For my own sympathies lie with what we might now call a collectivized allegorical reading. First, though, we should look at the substance of Most's proposal and its textual support. It sets the standard of coherence we must then attempt to surpass.

If Socrates' last words are the sincere expression of a debt to Asclepius incurred by the entire company, if they refer directly to 'someone whose health was important to the group . . ', that person, Most reasons, is almost certainly Plato himself—for his is the only real case of illness mentioned in the *Phaedo* (*Πλάτων δέ, οἶμαι, ἠσθένει*, 59b) (Most, p. 106). This view satisfies the requirements of grammar and context. But it recommends itself for a number of other reasons as well.

At the level of structure, for example, it reinforces the dialogue's 'ring composition' (Most, p. 107). Like the *Republic*, the *Phaedo* reaches its philosophical climax long before its final pages.[5] Its main themes—religion, science, the relation of opposites, and so on—are grouped symmetrically around a centre delimited by breaks in the narrative (88c–89b, 102a–b). Most's proposal extends this principle to the text's outer limits. It has Socrates' last words mirror Phaedo's reference to Plato in setting the scene.

More substantively, perhaps, it lets us hear in the last words a demonstration of the gift of prophecy Socrates claims for himself (*Apology* 39c, *Phaedo* 85b) as a benefit of his approaching death (Most, pp. 107–9). 'Such a claim', Most argues, '. . . needs to be substantiated in some definite and unmistakable way, preferably elsewhere in the same text, if it is not to seem hubristic' (pp. 108–9). Socrates' dying utterance, coupled with the fact of Plato's recovery, satisfies this requirement with an admirable minimum of literary artifice. The reader need simply measure the state of affairs reported in the reconstructed conversation against an obvious historical reality. As long as we adhere to the structure of Phaedo's narrative, there is no question of Socrates learning Plato's fate from an external source. On that the text is entirely silent. The only route available to him for acquiring this knowledge is clairvoyance.

Like the event that occasions it, the real significance of Socrates' vision—for the company gathered in the prison cell, and for posterity—is visible only in retrospect. A great deal more rode on the state of Plato's health than anyone present with Socrates that last day could have foreseen. Plato was their future: Socrates' 'philosophical heir' (Most, p. 109). His recovery was the condition for the possibility of his teacher's 'literary' immortality. It is an attestation of Plato's genius as a writer, Most concludes, that in the representation of an episode still fresh in the memories of

[5] For more on the ring composition of the *Republic*, see Robert Brumbaugh, *Platonic Studies in Greek Philosophy: Form, Arts, Gadgets and Hemlock* (Albany, 1989), pp. 17–27.

his contemporaries, he could find a way of expressing the depth of his own connection to Socrates without calling undue attention to himself or vitiating history:

> 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.
>
> (Most, p. 111)

What is wrong with Most's solution? We might begin by noting that the textual support he produces is equivocal. While the structure of the *Phaedo* in undeniably symmetrical, pairing Socrates' last words with the early reference to Plato's illness is arbitrary and, in effect, presupposes what it seeks to demonstrate. Given the prominence of religious themes throughout the dialogue, it is more likely the case that the reference to Asclepius at the end mirrors the reference to the Delos mission at the beginning (58a–c)—part of a more intricate commentary on the relation between the mythic tradition of the Athenian state and its 'new-age' Orphic/Pythagorean alternative. Socrates' claim to prophetic vision, on the other hand, is a double-edged sword in Most's own analysis. One of his (i.e. Most's) arguments against the 'mystical or allegorical' reading is that Socrates could not have known prior to his death whether in the act of dying (i.e. of obtaining a cure for life) Asclepius had aided him or not (Most, pp. 103–4). But how does that knowledge differ from the foreknowledge of Plato's recovery? If Socrates can see his friend's future, why can he not see his own? Most's appeal to Socratic clairvoyance seems unduly selective. In truth, it might just as easily function as evidence for the traditional interpretation.

There is, however, a deeper problem, tied, as I suggested before, to the presumption that Socrates' last words must refer to a case of concrete physical illness, i.e. that they must be sincere and direct. Throughout Plato's dialogues, the character of Socrates is drawn repeatedly in relation to his activity as a teacher. One of the consistent marks of that activity—arguably its hallmark—is irony, a technique of *indirect* communication.[6] The thesis that the last words represent a sincere (albeit subtle) acknowledgement of Plato's recovery requires us to take Socrates' final gesture as a step out of character. And this in a text which is, above all others, an *encomium* of that character. Granting the necessity of beginning somewhere in working toward a solution to this riddle, I would suggest that we are better served by the presumption of representational coherence. Which is to say: what we should expect in Socrates' last words, given the consistent portrayal of his character in Plato's works, is a kind of ironic epigram that refers us back to the pedagogical project of the *Phaedo* as a whole, i.e. back to precisely what concerns the group gathered in the prison *collectively*.

How shall we go about testing that expectation? Let us begin by speculating on the interests of the group as Plato presents them. He has Phaedo name fourteen people at the outset of the dialogue and indicate that there were a number of others (59b–c). But the principal interlocutors are Simmias and Cebes, both of whom had 'associated' with Philolaus (61d). Socrates' final teaching, then, is first directed to (and, in the early part of the discussion, prompted by) colleagues who have been issued Pythagorean credentials. Rowe has recently called into question the quality of these credentials, pointing out the tenuous nature of the link to Philolaus ('. . . associating with someone does not necessarily imply adherence to their ideas'), the lack of '. . . ancient evidence

[6] Cf. e.g. G. Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, 1991), pp. 19–44.

outside the *Phaedo* for the affiliation of either Simmias or Cebes' with this school, and their apparently sceptical reaction to some of Socrates' 'Pythagorean' arguments.[7] His case warrants careful consideration. But I am not persuaded that Simmias and Cebes contribute nothing to the 'Pythagorean' *ethos* of the dialogue as a whole. Plato rarely felt constrained, in his characterizations, by historical fact alone. His deeper purpose throughout the *Phaedo*, it seems to me, consists in representing Socrates as an alternative to what we might call Pythagorean eclecticism—the mixture of hard-headed science, metaphysics, and mysticism which he (i.e. Plato) himself appears to have regarded as conceptually promising but methodologically ungrounded. If Socrates' interlocutors were drawn simply (and loosely) as enthusiasts of that eclecticism, then their *conceptual* orthodoxy—or its absence—would be far less important. Their Pythagorean credentials would be on display at the level of discursive practice.

Could the last words be correlated to such a reading? Mitscherling has taken an important step in this direction. Struck by Socrates' endorsement of the 'common, vulgar religious order of Asclepius . . .' in the presence of those who seem to him 'members of the more "elite" religious and philosophical sect of Pythagoreanism',[8] he hypothesizes 'that his words are intended, at least in part, as some sort of comment' on the sect.[9] Key, here, is the significance of ἀλεκτρυόνα and its status in Pythagorean rite. While it is impossible to establish that status definitively ('our textual evidence is not only fragmentary but contradictory'[10]), both Diogenes Laertius and Iamblichus report that they (i.e. the Pythagoreans) forbid its sacrifice.[11] If those reports are accurate, Mitscherling reasons, 'then Socrates' last words would be tantamount to heresy for the Pythagoreans, an instance of Socrates' impiety with regard to their religious convictions'.[12]

What, though, could this signify? The ridicule of earnest interlocutors makes less sense, in pedagogical terms, than the hypothesis of a veiled reference to Plato, unless we take the dimension of Pythagoreanism Simmias and Cebes represent as the source of a disease for which Socratism is the cure. In that case, the humorous/heretical reference to Asclepius would constitute, in addition, a kind of benediction on the entire discussion. The heresy of the sacrifice Socrates orders would be a condensed, symbolic repetition of the heresy he had acted out for the good of the collective. Such an interpretation satisfies the requirements of grammar and context to which Most rightly draws attention while at the same time preserving the spirit of irony and pedagogical engagement that marks the character of Socrates throughout the dialogues. But it would require at least two things in the way of textual support: (i) evidence that Plato understood Socratism as a kind of philosophical tonic and (ii) evidence that he saw in the Pythagorean eclecticism of Simmias and Cebes, its advantages notwithstanding, at least the threat of an illness which would require that tonic.

(i) One of Most's arguments against the allegorical reading of Socrates' last words, as we saw earlier, turned on the claim that the images used to characterize the relation of life and death throughout the *Phaedo* are religious and/or political, not medical. That is true. But there is another theme, arguably of equal importance, which Plato develops explicitly in reference to health and hygiene: that of the philosopher's relation

[7] C. J. Rowe, *Phaedo* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 6–7, 194–5.
[8] J. Mitscherling, '*Phaedo* 118: the last words', *Apeiron* 19 (1985), 161–5, 161.
[9] Ibid. [10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., p. 162. [12] Ibid.

to language. This theme surfaces at a crucial point in the dialogue—just after the objections Simmias and Cebes bring against Socrates' first arguments for the immortality of the soul. Their doubts are deeply felt. The company gathered in the cell, 'thoroughly convinced' by what Socrates had said, finds itself suddenly confused and disheartened, '. . . not only in respect to the past discussion but also with regard to any future one' (88c). The mood is so palpable that Socrates feels compelled to warn against what he calls the *πάθος* of misology. At 89c:

'But let us be on our guard against a danger (*εὐλαβηθῶμέν τι πάθος μὴ πάθωμεν*).'
'Of what sort?' I asked.
'The danger of becoming misologists or haters of argument (*μισόλογοι*),' said he, 'as people become misanthropists or haters of men (*μισάνθρωποι*); for no worse evil can happen to a man than to hate argument. Misology and misanthropy arise from similar causes. For misanthropy arises from trusting someone implicitly without sufficient knowledge. You think a man is perfectly true and sound and trustworthy (*ἀληθῆ εἶναι καὶ ὑγιῆ καὶ πιστόν*), and afterwards you find him base and false. Then you have the same experience with another person. By the time this has happened to a man a good many times, especially if it happens among those whom he might regard as his nearest and dearest friends, he ends by being in continual quarrels and by hating everybody and thinking there is nothing sound in anyone at all (*οὐδενὸς οὐδὲν ὑγιὲς εἶναι τὸ παράπαν*). . . .

Misology, like misanthropy, is a function of hasty generalization. The misanthrope begins with the presumption that *everyone* is 'true and sound and trustworthy'. Then, in the face of its inevitable disappointment, he thinks the opposite. The word *ὑγίεια*—health or soundness—appears twice in the text above: first in the description of the misanthrope's naive optimism, secondly in its reversal. As the analogy develops, Socrates has recourse to it a third time.

The similarity lies in this: when a man without proper knowledge concerning arguments has confidence in the truth of an argument and afterwards thinks that it is false, whether it really is so or not, and this happens again and again; then you know, those men especially who have spent their time in disputation come to believe that they alone have discovered that there is nothing sound or sure (*οὐδενὸς οὐδὲν ὑγιὲς οὐδὲ βέβαιον*) in anything, whether argument or anything else, but all things go up and down, like the tide in the Euripus, and nothing is stable for any length of time. (90bc)

The suggestion here is clear enough. The hasty generalization common to misanthropy and misology blurs the line between health and degeneracy so profoundly that one no longer distinguishes between them. In the realm of human relations, the concomitant level of cynicism makes a casualty of genuine friendship and community. In the realm of language, it destroys the possibility of philosophical discourse, which is itself a diagnostics of argument. The misologist, says Socrates, cannot ever rise above pure sophistry.

If there is to be philosophical discussion, then, regarding matters of universal concern (virtue, politics, love, immortality, and so on), Socrates must insist on the possibility of an intellectual hygiene, i.e. a discourse which *takes responsibility* for the diagnosis and treatment of linguistic degeneracy and which locates that degeneracy not in language itself but in the expectations speakers and writers harbour in their *use* of it. Thus, at 90e, in a statement that constitutes both the conclusion of the warning against misology and the point of departure for responding to Simmias and Cebes, he says:

First then . . . let us be on our guard against this, and let us not admit into our souls the notion that there is no soundness (*οὐδὲν ὑγιὲς*) in arguments at all. Let us far rather assume that we ourselves are not yet sound (*ὅτι ἡμεῖς οὕτω ὑγιῶς ἔχομεν*), and that we must strive manfully

and eagerly to become sound (ἀλλὰ ἀνδριστέον καὶ προθυμητέον ὑγιῶς ἔχειν), you and the others for the sake of all your future life, and I because of my impending death.

The pivotal position of these remarks—between the evaluation of the group's crisis of confidence following the early discussion and Socrates' attempt to respond to it—extends the scope of the hygiene metaphor over the entire text. The difficulties we encounter in connection with the arguments in the first part of the conversation (61c–88c) now count as evidence for the assumption 'that we ourselves are not yet sound'. The rather complicated exercise in Socratic pedagogy that follows—the meditation on harmony (91c–95a), the autobiographical account of the disillusion with natural science and the recognition of the forms (96a–102a), the attempt at a higher synthesis of science and metaphysics (102b–107b), the myth of the true earth (107c–115a)—shows itself in advance as a striving 'manfully and eagerly to become sound', i.e. a course of therapy. The final qualification—'you and the others for the sake of your future life, and I because of my impending death'—emphasizes the collective nature of the project. It is the company as a whole that has been thrown 'into confusion and distrust' by the objections of Simmias and Cebes, the company as a whole which stands in need of linguistic convalescence.

It seems to me that the reading which best preserves the integrity of Plato's portrait of Socrates as teacher takes the reference to Asclepius at 118 as an acknowledgement of having met this need. In the final scene of the *Phaedo*, his course of therapy complete, Socrates bids the group continue in the life of inquiry (115b). Crito, answering on behalf of everyone, promises to persevere (115c). The πάθος of misology has been superseded.

(ii) What evidence is there, though, connecting that πάθος with Pythagorean eclecticism? Socrates' analysis of misology follows the objections of Simmias and Cebes. But are they not simply expressing misgivings about *his* arguments? Is *he* not ultimately responsible for the collective mood of 'confusion and distrust' to which Phaedo testifies at 88c?

In responding here we need to look more closely at the pedagogical function of the early discussion (61c–88c). The literature on this part of the text tends to focus on the question of the compatibility of specific passages with the 'more serious' arguments Socrates makes later on (esp. 96a–107b), i.e. on conceptual issues.[13] For our purposes, however, there is an aspect of its *structure* which is at least equally significant: at every important juncture, its development is guided either by Simmias or by Cebes.

It is Simmias, for example, who precipitates the discussion of philosophy and death (61c–69e). He hears in Socrates' advice to Evenus to 'come after (him) as quickly as he can' (ἐμὲ διώκειν ὡς τάχιστα) (61b) a recommendation of suicide. As Stewart has pointed out, Socrates' actual expression is ambiguous. διώκειν may mean 'to come after' or, in the discourse of jurisprudence, 'to prosecute'.[14] Simmias' assumption of the first, more common meaning—which is to say, his covert resolution of the ambiguity—is the condition for the possibility of the subsequent conversation. That Plato may have wanted his *readers* to hear some resonance of the other sense is suggested, I think, by his having Socrates present the response to Simmias 'as if we were in a law court' (ὥσπερ ἐν δικαστηρίῳ) (63b). In any case, he makes a jury of his

[13] Cf. e.g. M. Davis, 'Socrates' pre-Socratism: some remarks on the structure of Plato's *Phaedo*', *Review of Metaphysics* 33 (1980), 559–77. Also, K. Dorter, 'The reciprocity argument and the structure of the *Phaedo*', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 15 (1977), 1–11.

[14] D. Stewart, 'Socrates' last bath', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 10 (1972), 253–4, n. 2.

interlocutors and draws attention to the fact that, in the beginning at least, the fate of the argument is in their hands.[15]

At the conclusion of Socrates' response to Simmias (69e), it is Cebes who introduces the problem of the immortality of the soul. The celebration of our emancipation from the body makes sense, he cautions, only if 'we' endure. The common view, however, is that 'when the soul leaves the body it no longer exists anywhere, and that on the day when a man dies it is destroyed and perishes, and when it leaves the body and departs from it, straightaway it flies away and is no longer anywhere, scattering like a breath or smoke' (70a–b). Nothing in Socrates' defence of the philosophical life directly anticipates this fear. But it becomes the touchstone for the demonstrations that follow (the interlocutors return to it explicitly at 77d–e, between the second and third arguments for immortality).

Finally, the single *bona fide* Socratic theme in the first half of the dialogue—the doctrine of recollection—is thrust upon Socrates in a comic episode following the so-called cyclical argument (70c–72e). Rather than evaluate that argument on its own merits, Cebes suggests that the doctrine of recollection be appended to it as additional evidence (72e). Simmias then interjects, claiming to have forgotten its proofs, and the conversation proceeds.

Responsibility, then, for the position to which the interlocutors object (84c–88d) must be divided. For while it is undoubtedly the case that Socrates generates the series of specific arguments in the first part of the *Phaedo*, Simmias and Cebes themselves determine both the thematic material and the order of those arguments. It is their eclectic interests which break the trail, as it were. And they are, by turns, jurors, scientists, forgetful students, and fearful children. Now—what if the pedagogical function of the early discussions were precisely to expose the inadequacy of this eclecticism in responding to a question as challenging as that concerning the immortality of the soul? That is to say: what if Plato's real worry about Pythagoreanism—and, concomitantly, his reason for issuing Simmias' and Cebes' Pythagorean credentials—were to lie in the perception there of a methodological vacuum, a groundlessness behind an impressive, polymathic facade?

Such a worry would not be without precedent. It is attested long before the *Phaedo* by Heraclitus—who points to Pythagoras, among others, in claiming that 'the learning of many things (πολυμαθίη) does not teach understanding' and describes his mode of thinking as 'artful knavery' (κακοτεχνίην)[16]—and suggested in a statement attributed to Ion of Chios reported by Diogenes.[17] More to the point, however, adopting it as an hypothesis yields a reading of the early discussion which both reconciles the aims of that discussion with well-known Socratic techniques and connects Pythagorean discourse to the πάθος of misology: if the object of Plato's concern in the first half of the *Phaedo* is the loose eclecticism of Pythagorean science, i.e. the failure of Pythagoras and Pythagorean enthusiasts to elaborate structures or procedures capable of synthesizing their disparate intellectual interests when a question as challenging as that concerning immortality is in the offing, then we may take the early discussion, together with Simmias' and Cebes' objections to it, as a kind of *elenchus* at the level of method. Here, as in earlier dialogues, Socrates' pedagogical art consists in getting his

[15] Cf. 63b, 63e, 69de.

[16] Heraclitus fr. 40, Diogenes Laertius 9.1. Heraclitus fr. 129, Diogenes Laertius 8.6. For translation and commentary on these and other early references to Pythagoras, see Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 216–19.

[17] Ion fr. 4, Diogenes Laertius 1.120.

interlocutors to speak against themselves and so to recognize the inadequacies of their own discourse. The difference would lie in the fact that what is to be deconstructed in the *Phaedo* is not a single thesis but a (careless) mode of synthesis.

It is possible, then, to reconcile Mitscherling's suggestion that the last words constitute a deliberate anti-Pythagorean heresy with the recognition of a wider pedagogical purpose. If what we have said above holds, then the first part of the *Phaedo* diagnoses the misology latent in ungrounded polymathy, while the second (i.e. Socrates' response to Simmias' and Cebes' objections—his autobiography, the formal proof of the soul's immortality, and the myth of the true earth) provides a course of therapy, a lesson in proper intellectual hygiene. As an antidote to the πάθος of Pythagorean discourse, Socratism is, of course, heretical in relation to it. And if the cock was indeed sacred in the Pythagorean rite, the heresy is absolutely explicit.

A final point. In a text that leans heavily on the images of Orphic ritual, the reservation of Socrates' final words for an expression of gratitude to Asclepius—a local deity[18] just gaining a popular following in Athens at the turn of the fourth century—is deeply significant. It is the last in a series of attempts on Plato's part to accommodate the story of Socrates' exemplary life and death in the mythic/religious language of the *polis*.[19] His efforts in this regard seem to me quite central in representing the groundedness of Socratism over the Pythagorean alternative. In spite of the lure the spirituality of that movement must have had for Plato in describing the ecstatic experiences so essential to the philosophy of his middle period (i.e. love, recollection, faith in immortality),[20] it must have appeared to him, in the final analysis, politically inadequate.[21] The closed community of Orphic/Pythagorean initiates lies outside the city wall and is founded on a despair of public affairs—something Plato could never sanction. Philosophy sometimes retreats from the *polis* at large, but its fondest hope is to be welcomed there as a ruling principle.

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[18] Cf. M. Nilsson, *Greek Folk Religion* (New York, 1940), pp. 93–5.

[19] At 58a–c, Phaedo tells Echecrates that Socrates' execution was delayed by the annual mission to Delos in celebration of Theseus' victory over the Minotaur: 'Now the Athenians made a vow to Apollo, as the story goes, that if they were saved they would send a mission every year to Delos. And from that time even to the present day they send it annually in honour of the god. Now it is the law that after the mission begins the city must be pure and no one may be publicly executed until the ship has gone to Delos and back... for that reason Socrates passed a long time in prison between his trial and his death.' The mission to Delos is the condition for the possibility of the conversation the *Phaedo* reports. Beyond that, commentators have often been struck by Plato's efforts to cast his account of Socrates' last day in the imagery of the Theseus myth. Cf. e.g. R. Burger, *The Phaedo: A Platonic Labyrinth* (New Haven, 1984), pp. 14–24, 112–21.

[20] For a discussion of the importance of Orphic/Pythagorean religious themes in the *Phaedo* and in Plato's middle period generally see M. L. Morgan, *Platonic Piety* (New Haven, 1990). Morgan takes the prominence of Orphic themes in the *Meno*, the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, and elsewhere, as evidence of Plato's having preferred Orphism to the declining *polis*-religion. I take the references to Theseus and Asclepius at the beginning and the end of the *Phaedo*, together with Socrates' instruction of Simmias and Cebes, as evidence of a more critical attempt to ground the intellectual and religious experiences of the Pythagoreans in an ethical engagement of the *polis*, one object of which is preservation and renewal of its popular autochthonous spiritual heritage.

[21] On the politics of Orphism and Pythagoreanism in the context of the ancient *polis*, see M.Detienne, 'Between beasts and gods', in *Myth, Religion and Society* (Cambridge, 1981), pp.215–28.