

An Authentically Socratic Conclusion in Plato's *Phaedo*: Socrates' Debt to Asclepius

Sandra Peterson

Bonus intra. Melior exi (Come in good. Go out better.)

Inscription on the Asclepieion at Lambaesis, Africa (209-211AD)¹

The last words of the dying Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* are, "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. But you pay up and don't fail to take care." Asclepius is a god who heals the sick and preserves health. Socrates does not say why he owes the cock to Asclepius.

There is of course unshakable disagreement on the question whether Plato invented these last words of the depicted Socrates.² Here I pursue only an easier question: given that the *Phaedo* depicts Socrates uttering these words, does the *Phaedo* provide clues about why Socrates is in debt to Asclepius? I will argue that the *Phaedo* points to a specific understanding of Socrates' debt. Evidence outside the *Phaedo* suggests the same.

I list 21 interpretations of the last words.

Socrates is raving deliriously.³ Socrates is asking Asclepius to return Socrates from the dead.⁴ Socrates is being deliberately enigmatic.⁵ Socrates is offering a gift to avert misfortune after death.⁶ Socrates dies conscious of his own immortality and therefore sacrifices to Asclepius, who could raise the dead.⁷ Socrates is grateful for cure from doubts about the soul's immortality; Socrates had become doubtful as one after another argument for immortality appeared flawed; his concluding myth removed Socrates' uncertainty.⁸ Socrates is thanking Asclepius for having been cured of life, which Socrates views as a disease.⁹ Socrates is bribing Asclepius to avert death.¹⁰ Socrates is petitioning Asclepius to release himself and his friends from the Orphic cycle of reincarnation.¹¹ Socrates is asking his friends to commemorate his death with a ritual

¹ T319 in Edelstein . Translations from the *Phaedo* are Gallop's with some changes.

² Baron p. 269 observes that *Phaedo*'s report uses three verbs of saying-- *eipen*, *ephthegxato*, *ephê*: "By these three . . . indisputable verbs of saying heaped up in . . . most emphatic repetition, Plato emphasizes that this quote contains the last words of the historical Socrates. . . . These are Socrates' words, quoted by Plato, not Plato's invention, and stand alone as our best-attested verbal contact with the historical person."

³ Gautier, p. 124

⁴ Eckstein, p. 200. Most objects p. 103 to interpretations that look toward the future that Socrates says, "We owe." The event occasioning the debt has already occurred.

⁵ Nock p. 49

⁶ Dixsaut p. 408 note 382

⁷ Ranasinghe, p. 95: "Socrates' . . . new-found musical ability allows Socrates to die conscious of his immortality. This is . . . why he must sacrifice to Asclepius . . . who discovered the art of raising the dead."

⁸ David White p. 280

⁹ Nietzsche says , section 340 bk 4 of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*

"This ridiculous and terrible 'last word' means for one who has ears: 'O Crito, life is a sickness!' Is it possible! A man such as he, who cheerfully and before all eyes lived as a soldier -- was a pessimist!"

In agreement are Archer-Hind, *ad loc* , Carafides p.230, Nehamas, ch1 6, Stephen White pp. 158-159 and Jackson p. 18

¹⁰ Burger p. 126

¹¹ Stewart p. 258

meal of the sacrificed rooster.¹² Socrates is remembering a past unpaid debt to Asclepius.¹³ Socrates is thanking Asclepius for healing Plato from serious illness that kept Plato away from Socrates' final hours: a dying prophetic vision tells Socrates that Plato is healed.¹⁴ Socrates is showing gratitude to Asclepius for Plato, whose writings would be a remedy for Socrates' being forgotten.¹⁵ Socrates is jokingly thanking Asclepius, by offering the rooster, a conventional gift to a homosexual lover, because Socrates is having an erection as he dies; the erection naturally accompanies the process of dying but also results from the touching of Socrates' genital area by the poison bearer as he confirmed that Socrates' body was becoming cold.¹⁶ Socrates thanks Asclepius, who presides over drugs, for a painless death.¹⁷ Speaking not as patient, but as healer of the soul with Socratic discussion, Socrates thanks Apollo, patron of healers, through Asclepius, Apollo's son.¹⁸ Socrates thanks Asclepius for Crito's cure from the malaise of attraction to certain bad arguments; these were arguments that Socrates should escape from prison that Crito gave in the dialogue *Crito*, arguments from which Socrates dissuaded Crito.¹⁹ The cock to Asclepius replaces the libation Socrates was not allowed to pour from the hemlock; libation was not allowed because the drink was exactly measured to effect execution.²⁰ Socrates thanks Asclepius for having cured Socrates' friends in the *Phaedo* discussion from the malady of mistrust of argument; that malady threatened when arguments for immortality that at first were appealing were shown faulty.²¹ Socrates thanks Asclepius because Socrates dies morally healthy, with no vices.²² Socrates thanks Asclepius for good care throughout life.²³

My own positive proposal is that Socrates is grateful to Asclepius because Socrates has acted throughout the process of his dying with no failure in virtue. The *Phaedo* points very strongly to that intention behind Socrates' last words.

I emphasize that I say that that interpretation is very strongly pointed to: it is not conclusively presented. Nor should we expect that Plato would impose a definite interpretation on the words. Plato presumably did not know, any more than we know, what the words, if actual, meant. The *Phaedo* reports Plato absent from the execution, and there is anyway an inevitable gap between speaker and audience, especially when²⁴ the audience cannot pursue an utterance in further conversation. The Socratic lesson to admit our ignorance would not have escaped Plato.

¹² Stephen White p. 159

¹³ Gallop p. 225. Lucian T525 in Edelstein. Nock p. 49. Most p. 104 objects that Socrates is not that forgetful.

¹⁴ Most. Burger p. 214.

¹⁵ Dixsaut p. 408 note 382

¹⁶ Keuls pp. 79-82. Keuls believes Nietzsche's interpretation and her own compatible, and possibly both intended.

¹⁷ Cropsey pp. 173-4. Garland p. 124.

¹⁸ Santilli, pp. 31-32

¹⁹ Dumézil.

²⁰ Edelsteins p 132 vol II

²¹ Crooks. His interpretation is similar to Spitzer's, but differs in details and support.

²² Gilead, p. 48. Gilead's proposal focusses on Socrates' state as he dies. Differently from Gilead I dwell on Socrates' conduct while dying.

²³ Minadeo, p. 296. Similarly Nock p. 49 and Calder. Calder connects physical health and moral health: "Socrates' health, a gift of Asclepius, allowed <Socrates'> pursuit of truth."

²⁴

So my proposal is only that Plato leans toward one construal of Socrates' last words. The evidence I present is consistent with several interpretations in my list above, but I claim for my own interpretation that it goes beyond consistency to connect with more details of the *Phaedo* than any of the other interpretations.

Before I offer my reasons for my own proposal, I indicate very briefly my objections to the most famous interpretation of the last words, Nietzsche's proposal that Socrates gives thanks for cure from the "disease" of life. Endorsing that interpretation, Alexander Nehamas says,

"In my view, the *Phaedo's* animosity toward the body is so intense, so passionate, that it is difficult to believe that Plato is thinking of life -- the time when the soul is trapped in a body -- as anything other than a disease."²⁵

Nehamas paraphrases 69b thus:

"Vulgar virtue, the virtue of the lovers of the body . . . as opposed to the virtue of the soul philosophers possess, " has nothing healthy about it."

The phrase "has nothing healthy about it" is from the *Phaedo*. Nehamas comments,

"Even by itself, that statement shows that Plato believes that an explicit connection exists between embodied life and disease."

But the statement does not show explicit connection between embodied life and disease. To say that the body-lover's condition has nothing healthy about it speaks only about somebody's life, not everybody's. It connects only a *certain kind* of embodied life and disease. Socrates applies the phrase "lover of the body" to a person described at 68b-c as one "resentful that he is going to die". This lover of the body is "no lover of wisdom ." He is "in some sense ... a lover of riches and of prestige, either one of these or both." Socrates may think that any such lover of the body is diseased, but we have no evidence that everybody, and especially Socrates himself, is thus diseased. Socrates is neither resentful at death, nor a lover of riches or prestige.

Phaedo 63-69, the surroundings of the passage about the lovers of the body, does indeed contain expressions of hostility to the body. But it is far from obvious that Socrates straightforwardly expresses a belief of his own every time he utters a declarative sentence to Simmias and Cebes. Rather, Socrates often articulates unexamined views of interlocutors in order to explore implications of those views. In 63-69 he is likely to be articulating his interlocutors' views rather than his own because at 63b4 Socrates has undertaken to defend himself "more convincingly" [*pithanôteron*] before Simmias and Cebes than Socrates did before the jury that condemned him. Socrates makes his new defense to reassure Simmias and Cebes that it is right to take death lightly. For Socrates to call a projected defense "more convincing" is not for Socrates to say that it compels Socrates. It is instead to emphasize that the new defense will appeal to Simmias and Cebes especially. Socrates will show them that they are already committed, though unaware of their commitment, to the conclusion that Socrates should take death lightly.

What Socrates says at 66b-c cannot express a belief of his own:

"The body. . . fills us up with lusts and desires . . . so that really and truly we are, as the saying goes, never able to think [*phronêsai*] of anything at all because of it."

²⁵ Nehamas p. 161

This statement, to which Simmias assents, would be ludicrous as a description of Socrates. Socrates, at the extreme contrary, seems to spend almost all of his time thinking. Socrates' body does not continually distract him. We can hardly suppose that in the *Phaedo* Socrates' body is distracting him during his final conversation with his friends, a conversation of which he has asked (61e), "What else should one do during the time before sundown?"

Another place where Socrates seems to me to express, not his own views, but Simmias' views, in order to construct a "more convincing" argument is 63-65 . Here Socrates uses the phrases "all who actually engage in philosophy aright", "genuine philosophers" and "a philosophical man". Simmias uses the phrase "a genuine philosopher" at 64d. At 65d-e Simmias assents to the proposal that "the soul of the philosopher utterly disdains the body and flees from it". I see no compelling reason to think that these phrases for philosophers, which seem to me rather self-congratulatory, represent Socrates' own natural way of talking about philosophers and Socrates' description of himself. It seems more likely that Socrates is articulating views that he expects Simmias to acknowledge. Phrases like "genuine philosopher" may be characteristic Pythagorean locutions. Pythagoreans may make special claim to the designation "philosopher", since Pythagoras may have been first to use the word.²⁶ Simmias and Cebes are at least interested in Pythagoreanism, since they have been with Philolaus. When Simmias agrees to certain proposals about philosophers, Simmias reveals his understanding of the designation "philosophers." Socrates then explores the implications of Simmias' beliefs about philosophers. The ensuing argument will be "more convincing" to Simmias.

Possibly the ascetic premises that Simmias and Cebes accept were also Pythagorean. Using these premisses, Socrates discusses philosophy as training for death to persuade Simmias and Cebes on the basis of their own professions that they should believe that Socrates should be willing to die.

It is notable that the belief that the soul is immortal is characteristic Pythagorean teaching. Yet Simmias and Cebes also ask Socrates to persuade them of the soul's immortality. If Simmias and Cebes are Pythagoreans, they are already committed to a belief in the soul's immortality, although they have forgotten it as they await Socrates' execution. If they are not Pythagoreans, Socrates will still show them that from their own avowals it follows -- or will appear to them for a while to follow -- that the soul is immortal.²⁷ The discussion with Simmias and Cebes is a rather gentle elenchus or testing of their beliefs.

A different kind of apparent, but I think not actual, evidence that Socrates thinks escape from his body a good thing is the message that Socrates gives Cebes for Evenus at 61c;

"Tell him, if he's sensible, to come after me as quickly as he can."

²⁶ Though the use would be early, the reports are late. Cicero (1st century BC) says (*Tusc. Disp.* V 3,8), "Pythagoras said . . . he . . . was a philosopher." Diogenes Laertius (3rd century AD) VIII, 8-9 says. "When asked . . . who he <Pythagoras> was, he said, 'A Philosopher'."

²⁷ Rowe p. 7 doubts that Simmias and Cebes were Pythagoreans. Sedley p. 11 sees "the paradoxical spectacle of Socrates having to persuade the Pythagoreans of their own doctrine." Yes. Socrates is trying to comfort his friends by showing that it follows from their own beliefs that he should take death lightly.

This can be understood only as recommendation that Evenus die as quickly as possible. It is puzzling. It precedes Socrates' saying that he will give a "more convincing" defense, so it doesn't yet rely on premises about asceticism and bodily distractions. But it comes after Socrates has asked "But isn't Evenus a philosopher?", so it is apparently connected with something to be expected of those Simmias labels "philosophers". I propose that it calls attention to the philosopher's basic trait of recognizing the consequences of his beliefs. It is relevant that Evenus was mentioned in the *Apology* at 20b-c as someone who teaches, for pay, about "virtue, human and political". Socrates' advice for Evenus does not address humanity in general. It particularly addresses Evenus, and it is scathing criticism of him: if Evenus is sensible, he would realize that given the kind of life he leads, with a pretension to sell enormously important knowledge that he does not have, Evenus would be better off dead. I am reminded of Socrates' reproach to himself when he imagines himself speaking pretentiously at *Hippias Major* 304e: "When you're in a state like that, do you think it is any better for you to live than die?" (I see no evidence that Simmias and Cebes understand Socrates' piece of indirection here. Perhaps Evenus will.)²⁸

There is more to say about Nietzsche's interpretation, but I've said enough to indicate my stance on the part of the *Phaedo* that might appear evidence for Socratic contempt for the body.

So I return to my positive proposal, that Socrates expresses gratitude to Asclepius because Socrates was able to act virtuously in dying. In so proposing, I allow that the phrase 'the process of dying' does not pick out a definite time period. The process of dying certainly ends around the utterance of the last words, but there are several different points that we might count, for different purposes, as the start of the process of dying. It might begin with Socrates' first feeling the effects of the poison, or with Socrates' drinking the poison, or even with the beginning of Socrates' dying day, when he first learns that it will be his execution day. I will concentrate chiefly on the last moments, with some reference to earlier times in the day.

It now remains to show how my understanding of Socrates' last words fits with the particular details that Plato wrote into the *Phaedo*.

The proposal that Socrates owes Asclepius for Socrates' dying well accounts for the timing of Socrates' words -- at his final moment. Thanks occur naturally after a favor received. It is not likely that Socrates would have been so neglectful as only now to offer thanks for some event in the distant past. It is more likely that Socrates' thanks are for something more recent. The immediate recent past is the earlier part of Socrates' thirtieth day in prison. If one were going to give thanks for the manner of one's dying, it would be appropriate to wait until one's last breath. Most of us will not be in a position to recognize that our last conscious breath is occurring. But Socrates was in that position.

The proposal that Socrates is thanking Asclepius because Socrates acted virtuously in dying accounts for Crito's sharing in the debt. Socrates says to Crito, "We owe a cock to Asclepius." Of course it is only Socrates who is dying virtuously. But the *Phaedo* tells us that virtuous action is a favor to one's friends. At 115b1ff. when Crito asks what he can do as a favor for Socrates, Socrates tells him, "if you take care for yourselves, you will do a favor to me and mine." What Socrates means by "take care for

²⁸ Archer-Hind *ad* 60c1 *abd ad* 60d10

yourselves" is of course that his friends take care to live right. Socrates' acting virtuously as he dies is then also a favor to Crito for which Crito might be grateful not only to Socrates but also to the gods who have helped Socrates.²⁹

To say that Socrates acknowledges a debt to Asclepius for the grace of acting virtuously in dying is not to suggest that Socrates at some time struck a bargain with Asclepius, promising one favor for another. Socrates would not engage in commercial transactions with the gods.³⁰

The phrasing, "we owe", would, rather, be uncalculated and spontaneous thanks, as when we say, "I owe you" to someone who has done us an unforeseen good turn. (*Do sponte quod dedisti* rather than *do ut des.*)

Or, if we imagine that Socrates had previously asked the favor of dying well, the dialogue offers two possible times for the request. One time is when Socrates prays as he takes the poison: "that the removal from here to there will be a happy one." (117c1-3) Another time is when Socrates and Crito together retire for Socrates' bath. They might then have prayed that Socrates would meet his death well. Or even, as would account more strongly for the word "we", Socrates and Crito might have prayed in common, "May we both meet this death well."

Several elements of Phaedo's narration seem to me to point toward gratitude for virtuous dying as the probable intention behind Socrates' last words. For example, Phaedo says early on,

58e 3-6: "The man seemed to me happy . . . both in his manner and his words, he was meeting his end [*eteleuta*] so fearlessly and nobly; and so I thought that even while he was going to Hades he would not go without a divinely appointed lot[*theias moiras*] ."

Phaedo has thus introduced his entire narration in such a way as to predict that Socrates will die well -- "fearlessly and nobly" -- and under the watch of some god -- "with a divinely appointed lot".

Phaedo tells us that a central topic of his narration is the manner in which Socrates died, and Phaedo often reminds us that that is his topic. Echeocrates elicits Phaedo's narration by asking two questions: "What was it that he said before his death? And how did he die[*eteleuta*] ?"(57a5-6) "How did he die?" is a definite request for that very manner in which Socrates died. The answer, "He died drinking poison" is not enough. Echeocrates already knows that (57b1-2). The extended description of Socrates' conversation with its several arguments that the soul is immortal answers the question what Socrates said, but it also partly answers the question how he died, if the question is taken to mean: how did he spend his dying day? He died conducting an elenchus, though a gentler one than usual. Phaedo's careful account of Socrates' final minutes answers the question, "How did he die?" taken as a narrower question about the final minutes.

The verb in Echeocrates' question, "How did he die?" (57a6), *eteleuta*, is one instance of a number of occurrences of forms of the verb, or close relatives of it, in the

²⁹ "We" would not include the younger friends if they are Pythagoreans who reject animal sacrifice. See Mitscherling.

³⁰ *Euthyphro* 14e; *Alcibiades* II 149a; *Republic* 408b-c; Xenophon *Mem.* I 3,3. If the sacrifice of the cock is spontaneous thanks, it is no exception to Jackson's rule that Plato wishes (p. 35) "to avoid even the suggestion that . . . prayer . . . asks for payment on . . . service rendered."

dialogue. E.g. at 118a 6-7 Phaedo tells us what were Socrates' words at the end [*teleutaion* 118a6-7], that is, the words spoken with his dying breath. Phaedo's last sentence begins: "This was the end [*teleutê*] of our friend". The occurrence of derivatives of *teleutan* link beginning and end of the dialogue. In a report of the occasion of Socrates' dying we of course expect to find the verb "die". But Phaedo's prominent repeated use of it and derivatives of it seems to me an intended reminder that Phaedo's narration centrally answers the question, "How did he die?".

Phaedo's narration, again using derivatives of *teleutan*, depicts Socrates concerned about acting virtuously as he dies. At 89-90 Socrates says it is bad if someone "ended up [*teleutôn* 90d4] blaming argument rather than himself for his failure to find secure arguments, and "finished out [*diateloï* 90d6] the rest of his life" hating arguments. Socrates will not admit into his soul the thought that there is nothing healthy in argument; rather, he will think that he is not yet in a healthy state (90e2). He must strive to get healthy "for the sake of death itself"(91a1). Socrates wants "during this very time before my death" (91b4) to say what seems true to him.³¹ He reflects on his soul's health, its state with respect to virtue, even as he approaches death. Socrates' evident concern for his soul's health and how he acts during his last day of conversation anticipate gratitude for a virtuous process of dying.

Besides showing that Socrates wishes to act well in dying, Phaedo's narration quite pointedly relates that the dying Socrates does act well by enacting in dying the familiar virtues of living: bravery, temperance, justice, wisdom, and piety. Socrates reminds us of four of these virtues at 114e-115a. He does not use the word "virtue", but he names temperance, justice, and bravery as "adornments of the soul". He mentions with them liberality [*eleutheria*] and truth. The mention of truth evokes the familiar virtue of wisdom, or understanding of important truths. Liberality, that is, generosity, seems a new element. Socrates does not mention piety, but we naturally think of it in company with the other virtues.

The prison official ("the agent of the Eleven") who announces that it is time for the execution (at 116 b8 ff) commends Socrates as "kindest . . . gentlest and best of men who have ever come to this place". The official is sure that Socrates will not reproach the official for carrying out his job. Socrates rejects the suggestions of his friends that he should linger like others who have had food, drink, and sex late in the day before their executions. The poison arrives at 117a7.

"When he saw the man, Socrates said, 'Well, my good fellow, you're knowledgeable about these things: what must one do?' 'Simply drink it', he said, and 'and walk about until a heaviness comes over your legs; then lie down, and it will act of itself.' And at the same time he held out the cup to Socrates.

He took it perfectly calmly . . . without a tremor, or any change of colour or countenance; but looking up, as usual, like a bull, at the man, he said: 'What do you say to pouring someone a libation from this drink? Is it allowed or not?'

'We only prepare as much as we judge the proper dose, Socrates,' he said.

³¹ See Cropsey pp. 168-169. Rowe *ad loc.*

'I understand,' he said, 'but at least one may pray to the gods, and so one should, that the removal from this world to the next will be a happy one; that is my own prayer; so may it be.' With these words he pressed the cup to his lips, and drank it off with good humor and without the least distaste."

As his friends begin grieving, Socrates says (117e1), "What a way to behave. . . I've heard one should die with solemn speech. . . Calm yourselves and have strength."³²

Phaedo quite deliberately calls attention to Socrates' enactment of specific virtues.

Socrates displays Socratic wisdom in the poignant detail that Socrates asks an expert [*epistêmôn* 117a8] for advice about drinking the poison. Here, at the last, Socrates can defer to a genuine expert. The expert has the kind of straightforwardly teachable knowledge about poison that Socrates did not claim for himself about life. In consulting the expert, Socrates illustrates his own wisdom: Socrates knows what he doesn't know.

Previously in the day Socrates has also shown customary Socratic wisdom in acknowledging his ignorance about death. Someone might object that Socrates does not think he is ignorant about death because he has just given four proofs that the soul is immortal. I would reply that I do not see Socrates as convinced by any of those arguments. Of the four arguments, each of the last three is a response to the failure of its immediate predecessor. Only the concluding argument from causality is a candidate for being conclusive. After that argument, even Simmias still expresses doubt at 107b. And Socrates seconds Simmias' doubt, when he says,

107b: "The initial hypotheses, even if they're acceptable[*pistai*] to you people, should still be examined more clearly."

At 114d Socrates refers back to the conclusion of his final argument (105e-106d) with the comment, "Given that it is evident that the soul is a deathless thing". Although the conclusion may indeed be evident, evident is always evident relative to some viewer: Socrates' advice to examine the hypotheses more clearly admits that the interlocutors could reevaluate their at present evident conclusion.

Socrates dies bravely. Phaedo tells us very early (58e3-4) that Socrates died "fearlessly". At 117b3-5 Socrates takes the cup of hemlock without a tremor or change of expression. Socrates drinks it (117c3-4) with good humor. That is to say, he is not fearful.³³

It might be objected that although Socrates is not fearful, he is not yet brave here. After all, the reason Socrates is not fearful is that, as he says in the *Apology*, he does not know what his state will be after death. But Socrates cannot be brave, if he does not see himself as facing something worthy of fear.³⁴

³² "With solemn speech" renders *euphêmia*. Gallop translates, "in silence". Socrates is not literally prescribing silence at death, since he speaks with his dying breath.

³³ Burger p. 213 thinks that Phaedo's phrasing, "looking up, bull-like" alludes to the Minotaur representing fear of death. But "bull-like" may simply indicate Socrates' customary sidelong or mischievous look. Socrates' prominent eyes and flat nose might anyway appear bull-like. McDonald p. 329 note 26 compares *taurêdon* ("bull-like") to Aristophanes' phrase "casting the eyes sideways". A bull looks at one sideways because its eyes are on the sides of its head, rather than in front.

Arieti says, "The dialogue is not about the immortality of the soul at all, but about the courage with which the noble Socrates met his death." I think the dialogue is about Socrates enacting several virtues, not only courage, in the face of death.

³⁴ Burger pp. 47-48 and p. 231 note 32.

There is an answer to the objection. I grant that courage of course is connected with fear of some evil known to be likely or with fear of loss of some known good. But here his state after death is not the only thing Socrates might reasonably fear. Even with no elaborate opinions about what death is, Socrates at least knows that it involves the loss of a great good, his life with his friends. That loss he faces courageously.

Socrates dies temperately. He shows one kind of temperance in refusing to act as the others mentioned at 116e2-4, who delayed their executions for more food, drink, and sex, acted. He shows another variety of temperance or self-restraint in maintaining composure.

Socrates dies showing piety. Early on his last day he explains that he was making verses in order to comply with a possible sacred duty [*aphosioumenos* 60e1; *aphosiôsthai* 61a8-b1]. He had often had dreams commanding him to "make music"; at first he took the command to mean that he should do philosophy. But he wonders if the dream meant that he should create poetry; so now in prison he composes verse.

Socratic piety is often unconventional. But Socrates also displays piety in a conventional way as he dies, as when he suggests a libation, and when he offers the prayer before he drinks. In offering the libation, Socrates may seem to be ironic, in that he seems to show gratitude to the gods for poison. Poison would ordinarily be ungratifying. But a libation is a gesture especially appropriate at beginnings and endings and upon entering the unknown. As we use the word 'irony' today, we might say that the double role of the liquid, as poison and as solemn offering, is an irony of the circumstance. But Socrates' proposed gesture is not ironic.³⁵

Socrates displays justice in his final moments. Phaedo does not use the word 'justice', but we may see justice anyway in the description by the prison functionary who carried out his job with some regret. Socrates makes no reproach and shows no anger. Socrates displays generosity, which he mentioned earlier, along with justice, as an "adornment of the soul". In urging his friends to calm themselves and be strong, even as his own process of dying begins, Socrates shows an unselfish concern that his friends should do the right thing. Socrates has said earlier (at 115b) that a person's acting virtuously is a favor, that is, a generosity, to his friends.

Socrates' last words show justice and piety toward the gods and more generosity toward his friends.³⁶ Socrates speaks two clauses: first he says to Crito, "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius", second, "But you give what is due and don't be neglectful." The imperatives of the second clause, 'give what is due and don't be neglectful', are plural. The connective between the two clauses is *alla*. It literally means, "as for other matters", and is a "strong adversative".³⁷ The adversative makes a break between the first and second clauses of Socrates' last utterance. It shows a change of audience addressed and a slight change of topic. The first clause, about the cock, addresses Crito. The plural imperatives of the second clause perhaps address the whole group and go beyond concern

³⁵ Burnet *ad loc* and Burger p. 273 note 21 compare the libation to Theramenes' sarcastic hemlock "toast" to Critias. Critias had ordered Theramenes' death. Compare also Burger p. 214.

See *Oxford Classical Dictionary* 1996, "libation" entry.

³⁶ Weiss, "Virtue without Knowledge" p. 212 note 23 thinks the payment of a cock not "a genuine expression of piety". I think the gesture pious, but not a commercial transaction.

Weiss argues convincingly in *Socrates Dissatisfied* p. 23 that for Socrates piety and the just and philosophical life coincide.

³⁷ Smyth 2775

with the debt to Asclepius to speak generally about Socrates' younger friends' conduct in their entire lives in saying: "As for other matters, you all give what is due and don't be neglectful ." If at his last breath Socrates shows concern for his friends' manner of living, such concern is another act of generosity.³⁸

Clearly, for Socrates to die well would be for Socrates to die virtuously. Phaedo's careful description shows us that Socrates' dying was a virtuous act -- generous, just, pious, temperate, brave, and wise.

If someone should object that it is contrived to find an exercise of the virtues in these details surrounding Socrates' dying , these small dealings at the last with the few people in the prison, I'd disagree. In reduced circumstances the opportunities to enact the virtues may not be grand. Plato shows Socrates at work on the materials at hand.

A final detail to account for is that Socrates mentions Asclepius in particular. Asclepius is the god who has the power to heal. It is not Asclepius' role to preside over virtuous action. It might seem that the proposal that Socrates' last words express gratitude for a virtuous death cannot account for gratitude to Asclepius.

As others have noticed, what makes an important connection with Asclepius is that even within the *Phaedo* Socrates speaks of health of the soul and doctoring for conditions of the soul. The body lover at 68b-c ,who resents death, does not love wisdom, and loves prestige and riches is in a condition that has "nothing healthy" (69b) about it. A person (89d-91a) who thinks despairingly that argument is pointless and has no health in it is, himself, not healthy. Phaedo marvels at how well Socrates "doctored" (89a5) out of their unpleasant condition the group in the prison when they recognized the failure of the first several arguments for immortality . Elsewhere Plato's Socrates says(*Republic* 444e) that virtue is a kind of health and beauty of the soul, and vice a disease. At *Gorgias* 479b "an unhealthy soul" is "a soul that's rotten with injustice and impiety" . Since Asclepius wards off bad conditions and preserves health, it would be natural for Socrates to think of Asclepius as presiding over dying in a healthy, that is, virtuous, way.

Evidence external to Plato about Asclepius suggests that Asclepius "was not just a healer but a saviour and helper of much broader powers", someone who could be addressed for help of many kinds, for "every little detail of daily life".³⁹ Asclepius might help with a variety of problems besides the ailments which medicine would treat.⁴⁰ Some

³⁸ Dumezil pp. 140-142 dwells on the change of persons between first and second clause, but not on "But".

³⁹ Parker p. 183. The phrase "every little detail of daily life" is from Edelstein vol II 104 on T316. The Edelsteins give late testimonia for Asclepius as general helper, but think his aspect as general helper emerged early.

Athenaeus (2nd-3rd century AD) reports (Edelstein T549) that Stratonicus (about 400BC), having won a harp-playing competition, left a trophy for Asclepius inscribed, "dedicated by Stratonicus from the spoils of bad harp-players." This suggests gratitude to Asclepius for an excellent performance. A third century BC inscription refers to both Apollo and Asclepius: "to pray them to grant forever to all citizens and to their children fair health and to grant that . . . noble character [*tên kalokagathian*] always prevail." (Edelstein T296)

An Orphic Hymn (T601 Edelstein) addresses Asclepius as "granting a good [*esthlon*] end to life." *Esthlon* is typically moral appraisal. So at least at the time of composition of the Orphic Hymn, Asclepius presided over good death. Nock p. 49.

⁴⁰ Dodds p. 168-169. Edelstein T423. Theophrastus (372-287 BC) *Characters* XXI 10 (T542 Edelstein). Edelstein T423 2nd half of 4th century BC.

evidence suggests a preventive as well as a healing role for Asclepius.⁴¹ If Asclepius might ward off trouble in general, it would be entirely understandable for Socrates to think of Asclepius as presiding over virtuous dying in harsh circumstances.

It is of interest also that Asclepius was not an Olympian. Asclepius has partly ordinary human origins. It is of interest, though somewhat controversial, that Asclepius had none of the moral failings of the Olympian gods. His story records only good deeds. Because Asclepius is less grand than the Olympian gods, and also has displayed none of the failings of the Olympians, it seems to me especially appropriate for the unpretentious Socrates, who thinks the gods are entirely beneficent, to refer to Asclepius.⁴²

The proposal that Socrates expresses gratitude for dying virtuously should satisfy those who think that Socrates' final words, to be in character, should be ironic. Irony in speech can involve saying the opposite of what you (in another way) say. In saying, in effect, "I am grateful to die well", Socrates says something that is true in one way and false in another. He speaks with his usual irony.

Moreover, in our own current extended use of "irony", which applies to actions and events as well as speech, we may surely say that dying well by living well, and vice versa, is irony in execution. There is enough irony here for anyone.

I note another description of Socrates' dying. Xenophon, like Plato, was absent from Socrates' final day in prison. Xenophon doesn't say who told him about it, and he mentions no final words about Asclepius. But Xenophon's less detailed account is perfectly congruent with Phaedo's account of Socrates' acting virtuously in his dying. Xenophon makes clear that Socrates died well by living well. Xenophon says (*Memorabilia* IV 8, 2 ff) ,

"For it is agreed that none among recorded men bore death in a finer way [*kallion*]. For it became necessary for him to live thirty days after the verdict because the Delia was that month, and the law allows no one to die at the hands of the demos until the mission has returned from Delos. And for this time he showed himself plainly for what he was to all his intimate acquaintances as he went on living no differently than in the time before. And in the time before then he was admired most of all men for living cheerfully and contentedly. And how would anyone die in a finer way than that?"

Some questions arise for my interpretation. One is: If Socrates' final mention of Asclepius shows conventional piety toward a traditional god, is the Socrates of the *Phaedo*, in accepting such a specific element of religion, inconsistent with the Socrates of other dialogues who does not know anything important? I think not. Socrates' observing an available ritual shows that Socrates has nothing new to offer on the mystery of the cosmos and human life that religion addresses. Socrates seems to me receptive to any harmless ritual, or indifferent what religious practices he uses to gesture at his human place. His indifference is a sort of anti-theology, again an admission of his ignorance.

⁴¹ An early votive relief shows a muleteer who thanks Asclepius for having escaped "a fall of mighty rocks". Parker p. 183 mentions this early ("one of the earliest") votive relief and inscription (*LIMC* s.v. 'Asklepios' pl 667 no 395).

⁴² Edelstein, vol 2, p. 74. Vlastos ("Review") disagrees, claiming that Asclepius sent misfortune as well as cure (p. 271 note 11. For possible misfortune (or moral improvement?) see C4 (47) p. 121 in LiDonnici.

Another question is: If I say that Socrates is indebted to Asclepius for dying virtuously, do I deny that Socrates himself gets moral credit for his way of dying? I don't think so. Although Socrates' dying is not his own action, his dying well is his own action. He does not act as a puppet of the gods. Nevertheless, he can coherently view his dying well as a grace or a favor that he does not entirely control. To view his virtuous death as a grace, a "divine lot", is simply to acknowledge that the adverse circumstances might have been an influence for a failure in virtue.⁴³

Another question is: precisely what sort of failure was it from which Socrates thought that Asclepius had protected him? I'm not certain. It would be natural for Socrates to reflect that he faced severe circumstances. He had to await his execution in prison for an undetermined number of days (where the number turned out to be 30). The effect of hemlock poisoning would have been well known to Socrates. Perhaps hemlock was known to cause lapses from one's usual or intended behavior.⁴⁴ But what sort of lapse? The depicted Socrates shows no concern that he might be overcome by fear. But I can imagine -- and perhaps this is what Plato intended us to imagine-- that Socrates might have anticipated extreme grief as he faced the loss of his life of conversation with his friends. He might have anticipated anger, on various counts. For Socrates an extremity of grief or anger would have been a lapse from virtue because it would, I suppose, amount to an impious or unjust lack of trust in the gods. It would also have been unwise, as being inconsistent with his earlier statements that he is in the care of good gods (62b, 63b, 69e).

Dwell briefly on the possibility that Socrates wondered if grief might undo him at the end. If Socrates was concerned about grief, to have that concern would be for Socrates to acknowledge that he leaves his life among his friends with great regret, aware of his own strong attachment to that life. That attachment struck Xanthippe (60a) as the most prominent loss that he faces when she says, "So this is the very last time, Socrates, that your friends will speak to you or you to them."⁴⁵ If the gratitude to

⁴³ Plato depicts Socrates as offering other prayers for aspects of moral well-being without implying that Socrates has no responsibility for them. Jackson pp. 15-16 lists prayers "to be a philosopher" (*Phaedrus* 278b), "for inner beauty, wisdom, temperance, and harmony" (*Phaedrus* 279b-c), "for success in discovering the nature of justice" (*Republic* 432c).

⁴⁴ Bloch argues that death by hemlock was "calm."

Ober says that hemlock poisoning causes the observable effects of salivation, retching, vomiting, gasping respiration, convulsion, and bluish discoloration of the skin. The subject feels burning in the mouth and nausea, and is conscious until the end.

Plato does not report Ober's effects. Ober and Gill ask why Phaedo mentions no observable effects except the final twitch. They think the omission of ghastly details a softening literary device of Plato's. Graves et. al. also remark that Plato describes no subjective sensations. Only Socrates could have reported them. But perhaps Socrates was making an effort to die in *euphêmia*. Socrates covers his face -- perhaps to conceal expected effects of the poison -- and uncovers it only to speak at the last.

⁴⁵ At 60a4 Xanthippe "cried out" [*anêuphêmêse*] . Burger p. 225 note 6; Burnet p. 59; Dixsaut note 36 p. 321 discuss the word. The most literal translation is "shouted *euphêmeite*". It could convey that Xanthippe asked people to observe solemn speech, or that she gave a ritual greeting, such as "Benediction". What Phaedo quotes Xanthippe as saying, a stark statement of the obvious, could count as an instance of benediction—a solemn description of the occasion. Whether one takes it as affectionate (Saxonhouse p. 119) or as hysterical depends on one's overall interpretation of the scene. Phaedo's assessment, "just the kinds of thing that women are given to saying" (60a) does not help. We don't know if Phaedo thought women given to emotional excess, or to simple literalness.

Asclepius is admission of that attachment, the gratitude to Asclepius is a final sign of Socrates' appreciation for his life rather than the cynical snarl of which Nietzsche complains.

I summarize my progress up to now. The proposal that Socrates is thanking Asclepius for the favor of dying well recommends itself because of these several elements of Phaedo's narration. Socrates speaks of the debt at the instant he dies. Crito has a share in the debt. Phaedo predicts early in the dialogue that Socrates will die well ("fearlessly and nobly" 58e) and under the protection of the gods (58e: "a divinely appointed lot [*theias moiras*]"). Echechrates' second question, "How did he die?", announces that a main topic of the dialogue, a topic of which we are often reminded, is that very manner in which Socrates died. Socrates displays concern to die with a healthy soul, which would of course be the source of virtuous action. Phaedo's narration deliberately dwells on Socrates' enactment, as he dies, of the specific virtues. Asclepius presides over health. Asclepius would then be a natural choice for Socrates to mention in connection with the only health that interests Socrates. These elements strongly connect the debt to Asclepius with Socrates' dying virtuously.

I have until now looked within the *Phaedo* to understand Socrates' words. But there is a principle that would have us look outside. It is Terry Penner's inspiring admonition: "Never consider any one expression of Socrates' views in isolation from other expressions of Socrates' views".⁴⁶ The views that Socrates expresses in Plato's other dialogues show Socrates interested consumingly in one thing: how to live the best life, that is, how to live virtuously. The Socrates of the *Gorgias* shows that consuming interest at 526d-527e when he imagines himself after death facing a judge of souls. He says,

"I look at how I may display to the judge a soul that is as healthy as possible. . . . By making a practice [*askôn*] of truth, I will really try to live, and when I die, to die, while being the best I can be. . . . This way of life is best: to live and die while practicing [*527e4 askountas*] justice and other virtue."

Given Penner's Socratic Context Principle, and given such expressions of Socrates' views, the interpretation I offer of the last words in the *Phaedo* is exactly what is to be expected. The mature Socrates Plato depicts has as his only deep concern to live virtuously.⁴⁷ On Socrates' last day in prison, his only way to live well was by dying well. By default, that is the only thing that Socrates would pray for or be thankful for.⁴⁸

If Socrates' last words also hint at regret, they echo Xanthippe's cry. Xanthippe precisely locates the central activity of Socrates' life, and hence, if Socrates regrets leaving life, what he regrets to leave.

⁴⁶ Penner p. 122. Penner's maxim applies only to dialogues he takes Plato to have written early, to attempt to convey the character of the actual Socrates. I would extend the maxim to the *Phaedo* as a maxim about consistency of portrayal of the character Socrates at an especially important occasion in his life.

⁴⁷ See Vlastos 1991 and 1994 for Plato's depiction of Socrates' consuming interest in living virtuously. That depiction rules out many interpretations of the last words.

⁴⁸ I am indebted to many people for discussion.

Bibliography

- Archer-Hind, R.D. *The 'Phaedo' of Plato* MacMillan: London 1883
- Arieti, James *Interpreting Plato: the Dialogues as Drama* London: Rowman and Littlefield 1991
- Baron, James R. "On Separating the Socratic from the Platonic in *Phaedo* 118" *Classical Philology* 70 1975 pp. 268-269
- Bloch, Enid "Hemlock Poisoning and the Death of Socrates: Did Plato Tell the Truth?" <http://www.ex.ac.uk/plato/bloch.htm>
- Boudouris, K.J. *The Philosophy of Socrates* Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture 1991
- Brann, Eva, Kalkavage, Peter, and Salem, Eric. *Plato's 'Phaedo'. Translation, introduction, and glossary* Focus Classical Library: Newburyport, MA 1998
- Burger, Ronna *The 'Phaedo': A Platonic Labyrinth* Yale University Press: New Haven 1984
- Burnet, John *Plato's Phaedo. Edited with Introduction and Notes* Clarendon Press: Oxford 1925
- Calder, William M. "Socrates' Rooster Once More" *Mnemosyne* 52 1999 p. 562
- Carafides, J. L. "The Last Words of Socrates" *Platon* 23 1971 pp. 229-232
- Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* . trans J.E. King Harvard University Press: Cambridge 1989
- Clark, Pamela "A Cock to Asclepius" *The Classical Review* 21 1952 p. 146
- Cleary John J. and Gurtler, Gary M., S.J., *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Philosophy* vol XIV 1998 Brill: Leiden 1999
- Crooks, J. "Socrates' Last Words: Another Look at an Ancient Riddle" *Classical Quarterly* 48 1998 pp. 117-125
- Cropsey, Joseph "The Dramatic End of Plato's Socrates" *Interpretation* 14 1986 155-175
- Cumont, Franz "A Propos des Dernières Paroles de Socrates" *Academie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres: comptes rendus* 1943 Paris: Henri Didier 1943
- Diogenes Laertius *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* vol II transl. R.F. Hicks. Harvard University Press: Cambridge 1991
- Dixsaut, Monique *Platon: 'Phédon'* Flammarion: Paris 1991
- Dodds, E.R. *Plato. Gorgias. A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary.* Clarendon Press: Oxford 1959
- Dodds, E.R. *The Ancient Concept of Progress* Oxford: Clarendon Press 1973
- Dodds, E.R. "The Religion of the Ordinary Man" , pp. 140-155 of Dodds 1973
- Dumézil, Georges "...*Le moyne noir en gris dedans Varennes*" *sotie Nostradamique suivie d'un Divertissement sur les dernière paroles de Socrate* Gallimard: Paris 1984
- Eckstein, Jerome *The Deathday of Socrates* Columbia Publishing Co.: Frenchtown 1981
- Edelstein, Emma and Edelstein, Ludwig *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* the Johns Hopkins Press: Baltimore 1945
- Gallop, David *Plato: Phaedo Translated and with Notes* Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975

- Garland, Robert *Introducing New Gods : the Politics of Athenian Religion* London: Duckworth 1992
- Gautier, R. "Les Dernières Paroles de Socrate" *Revue Universitaire* 64 1955 274-275
- Gilead, Amihud *The Platonic Odyssey: A Philosophical-Literary Inquiry into the 'Phaedo'* Rodopi: Atlanta 1994
- Gill, Christopher "The Death of Socrates" *Classical Quarterly* 23 1973. Also in Irwin.
- Graves, Bonita M. et al "Hemlock Poisoning: Twentieth Century Scientific Light Shed on the Death of Socrates" in Boudouris, K.J., pp. 156-168
- Irwin, Terence *Socrates and His Contemporaries* Edited with Introduction. Garland Publishing: New York 1975
- Jackson, B. Darrell "The Prayers of Socrates" *Phronesis* 16 1971 14-37
- Keuls, Eva *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* University of California Press: Berkeley 1985 (1993 edition)
- Kraut, Richard, ed. *Cambridge Companion to Plato* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992
- LiDonnici, Lynn R. *the Epidaurian Miracle Inscriptions: Text, Translation, and Commentary* Scholars Press: Atlanta, Georgia 1995
- McDonald, John M.S. *Character-Portraiture in Epicharmus, Sophron, and Plato* University Press of Sewanee Tennessee 1931
- McPherran, Mark *The Religion of Socrates* Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park 1996
- Minadeo, Richard, "Socrates' Debt to Asclepius" *Classical Journal* 66 1970-71 294-297
- Mitscherling, Jeff "Phaedo 118: the Last Words" *Apeiron* 19 1985 161-165
- Most, Glenn, "A Cock for Asclepius" *Classical Quarterly* 43 1993 pp 96-111
- Nehamas, Alexander *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections >from Plato to Foucault* University of California Press: Berkeley 1998
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*
- Nock, Arthur Darby Review of Edelstein and Edelstein *Classical Philology* 45 1950 pp. 45-50
- Ober, William B., M.D. "Did Socrates Die of Hemlock Poisoning?" *Ancient Philosophy* 1978 115-121
- Parker, Robert *Athenian Religion: A History* Clarendon Press: Oxford 1996
- Penner, Terry "Socrates and the Early Dialogues" in Kraut.
- Prior, William J. *Socrates: Critical Assessments* vol II London: Routledge 1996
- Ranasinghe, Nalin *The Soul of Socrates* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 2000
- Rowe, C. J. *Plato: 'Phaedo'* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993
- Santilli, Paul C, "Socrates and Asclepius: the final words" *Studi Internazionale di Filosofia* 22 1990 pp 29-39
- Saxonhouse, Arlene "Xanthippe and Philosophy: Who Really Wins?" in Cleary and Gurtler
- Sedley, David "The Dramatis Personae of Plato's *Phaedo* pp. 3-26 in Timothy Smiley, ed., *Philosophical Dialogues: Plato, Hume, Wittgenstein* Oxford University

- Press: Oxford 1995
- Shorey, Paul *Plato: the Republic with an English Translation* Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts 1963
- Smith, Nicholas and Woodruff, Paul *Reason and Religion in Socratic Philosophy* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000
- Smyth, Herbert Weir *Greek Grammar* revised by Gordon Messing . Harvard University Press: Cambridge 1984
- Spitzer, Adele "Immortality and Virtue in the *Phaedo*: A Non-Ascetic Interpretation" *The Personalist* 57 1976 113-125
- Stevens, John A. "Friendship and Profit in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*" pp 209-237 of Vander Waert
- Stewart, Douglas J. "Socrates' Last Bath" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 10 1972 pp. 253-259
- Trotignon, Pierre "Sur la Mort de Socrate" *Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale* vol 81 1976 pp 1-10
- Vander Waert , Paul A. *The Socratic Movement* Cornell University Press: Ithaca 1994
- Vlastos, Gregory *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1991
- *Socratic Studies* ed. Myles Burnyeat Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1994
- "Religion and Medicine in the Cult of Asclepius: A Review Article" *Review of Religion* 13 1949 pp. 269-290
- Weiss, Roslyn "Virtue without Knowledge: Socrates' Conception of Holiness in Plato's *Euthyphro*" pp. 195-216 in Prior
- *Socrates Dissatisfied* Oxford University Press: Oxford 1998
- Westerink. L.G. *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's 'Phaedo': vol II Damascius* North Holland: Amsterdam 1977
- White, David A. *Myth and Metaphysics in Plato's 'Phaedo'* Associated University Presses: London and Toronto 1989
- White, Stephen A.. "Socrates at Colonus: A Hero for the Academy" pp. 151-175 in Smith and Woodruff.