PLATO’S DOCTRINE OF THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

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Abstract

Plato’s doctrine of the immortality of the soul is one of his most influential ideas, one adopted, developed, and criticized by philosophers and theologians from late antiquity to the early modern period. On the basis of a careful reading of his dialogues, this dissertation argues that Plato is not in fact committed to a temporally everlasting postmortem existence for all individual souls, such as the later tradition generally took him to be asserting. This literal conception of immortality is certainly to be found in the dialogues, but ultimately Plato is more interested in a range of non-literal conceptions, in particular the attainment through philosophy of an earthly existence with an “immortal” (i.e. divine) quality of blessedness. The doctrine is thus best understood as a mythological metaphor for the human soul’s peculiar ontological status in between perceptible things and intelligible entities (the Forms), but enjoying a privileged relationship of cognitive access to the latter. Plato does also suggest that belief in an afterlife can be beneficial, at least for some people, by promoting virtuous behavior or mitigating the fear of death.

The first chapter supplies an introductory overview of Plato’s intellectual context and ancient reception, followed by a survey of the rest of the dissertation. The second chapter argues that Plato did not hold the soul to be incorporeal, in contrast to later Platonists who made this the foundation of the soul’s literal immortality. The third chapter examines the relationship between Plato’s doctrines of psychic immortality and tripartition. The fourth chapter discusses the intention and status of his mythic portrayals of an afterlife involving rewards and punishments. The fifth chapter interprets Plato’s doctrine of recollection as a psychological device intended to shore up confidence in the possibility of philosophical invest-
tigation. The sixth chapter discusses the status of Plato’s “proofs” of immortality in general, on the basis of Socrates’ warning against misology in the *Phaedo*. The seventh chapter gives a selective discussion of Christian responses to Plato’s doctrine. A brief conclusion reflects on immortality as a human aspiration.
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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abstract</strong></td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Acknowledgments</strong></td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Introduction</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 General purpose of the study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Plato's background and context</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Reception and development of Plato’s views in antiquity</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Method and scope of the study</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Argument of the study</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2 The Incorporeality of the Soul</strong></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 The Affinity Argument (<em>Phaedo</em> 77d-84b)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Plato’s use of the term <em>asomatos</em></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 The construction of immortal soul in the <em>Timaeus</em> (34b-44d)</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 The incorporeal soul in the Old Academy</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 The Platonists on the incorporeal soul</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3 Immortality and the Tripartite Soul</strong></td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Immortality and tripartition in <em>Republic</em> X (608c-612a)</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Immortality in the <em>Timaeus</em> (69c-73a, 90b-c)</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 The immortal soul in the <em>Phaedrus</em> (245b-257b)</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 3.4 The Platonist debate about the extent of immortality

#### Ennead IV.7.10-14, I.1.1-12

- Page 113

### 3.5 Plotinus on the “true human being”

- Page 116

### 3.6 Platonism and the self

- Page 127

### 4 Punishments and Rewards in the Afterlife

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Morality and the afterlife in Republic II</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Mythic discourse in Plato: the Epicurean criticism and the Platonist defense</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Punishment, virtue, and the afterlife in the Gorgias (523a-527e)</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 The myth of the afterlife in Laws X (903a-905d)</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5 Immortality and Recollection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Recollection and immortality in the Meno (81a-86c)</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Knowledge in Socrates’ Defense (Phaedo 63b-69e)</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Recollection and immortality in the Phaedo (72e-77a)</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Recollection in the Phaedrus (247c-252b)</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 6 The Status of the Proofs of Immortality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Socrates on the fear of death in the Apology and the Phaedo</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 The meaning of trust (pistis)</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Misology and misanthropy (Phaedo 89d-90d)</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 Sickness, health, and pragmatic arguments (Phaedo 90d-91c)</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5 Socrates and skepticism</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 7 The Christian Reception

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.1 The Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 The immortality of the soul in Justin Martyr’s Dialogue with Trypho the Jew</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 Health and understanding in Augustine’s Soliloquies I</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4 The arguments for the immortality of the soul in Augustine’s Soliloquies II</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Christian priesthood, finding the doctrines of Christ levelled to every understanding, and too plain to need explanation, saw, in the mysticisms of Plato, materials with which they might build up an artificial system which might, from its indistinctness, admit everlasting controversy, give employment for their order, and introduce it to profit, power and preeminence. The doctrines which flowed from the lips of Jesus himself are within the comprehension of a child; but thousands of volumes have not yet explained the Platonisms engrafted on them: and for this obvious reason that nonsense can never be explained. ... He is peculiarly appealed to as an advocate of the immortality of the soul; and yet I will venture to say that were there no better arguments than his in proof of it, not a man in the world would believe it.

Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 5, 1814

Den Menschen nämlich zurückübersetzen in die Natur; über die vielen eitlen und schwärmerischen Deutungen und Nebensinne Herr werden, welche bisher über jenen ewigen Grundtext homo natura gekritzelt und gemalt wurden; machen, dass der Mensch förderhin vor dem Menschen steht, wie er heute schon, hart geworden in der Zucht der Wissenschaft, vor der anderen Natur steht, mit unerschrocknen Oedipus-Augen und verklebten Odysseus-Ohren, taub gegen die Lockweisen alter metaphysischer Vogelfänger, welche ihm allzulange zugeflötet haben: “du bist mehr! du bist höher! du bist anderer Herkunft!”—das mag eine seltsame und tolle Aufgabe sein, aber es ist eine Aufgabe—wer wollte das leugnen! Warum wir sie wählten, diese tolle Aufgabe? Oder anders gefragt: “warum überhaupt Erkenntniss?” Jedermann wird uns darnach fragen. Und wir, solchermassen gedrängt, wir, die wir uns hunderte Male selbst schon ebenso gefragt haben, wir fanden und finden keine bessere Antwort...

Friedrich Nietzsche, Jenseits von Gut und Böse §230
1 Introduction

An epigram by Callimachus from the third century BCE tells of one Cleombrotus, who jumps to his death from a high wall, “having seen no evil worthy of death, but having read one book by Plato, on the soul.” The book referred to is the *Phaedo*, a dialogue recounting a conversation of Socrates shortly before he is put to death, in which he argues for the immortality of the soul and the desirability of disembodied existence. Did poor Cleombrotus fall for this? Later ancient writers were divided about the significance of the story: some blamed Cleombrotus for a foolishly literal misunderstanding of the *Phaedo*, while others thought that the anecdote reflected badly on Plato. The Christian writer Lactantius, commenting on the story in the fourth century CE, concluded that the immortality of the soul must be “an extremely accursed doctrine, much to be avoided, if it drives human beings from life!”

Plato’s doctrine of the immortality of the soul—often called one of the “twin pillars of Platonism,” alongside the theory of Forms—has indeed always been controversial. Despite

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1 Callimachus, epigram 23 Pfeiffer = *Anthologia graeca* VII.471.
2 *Divine Institutes* III.18, cited by Williams 1995, who gives an overview of the complex history of the reception of the Cleombrotus story in antiquity. Note that elsewhere in the same work Lactantius himself accepts the doctrine of the immortality of the soul (VII.7-8), but views Plato’s exposition and defense of it as incomplete.
3 The phrase is often attributed to Francis Cornford without a precise citation; to my knowledge it appears in two places. In Cornford [1935], 2, the first pillar is “the immortality and divinity of the rational soul,”
criticism from every other ancient philosophical school, the doctrine was maintained into late antiquity by Plato’s followers, from whom it was adopted by Christian thinkers (as well as Jewish and Islamic ones), who in turn passed it down to medieval and early modern Europe. For much of the past millennium, the *prima facie* unpromising business of proving the immortality of the soul was (much like proving the existence of god) a staple business of philosophers, including (to name but a few) Avicenna, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Astell, and Mendelssohn. This tradition effectively ended with Kant, who argued that the immortality of the soul could not be proved—though he maintained it as an indemonstrable belief practically necessary for moral life.

The primary purpose of this study is to give an account of the origin of this philosophical tradition in Plato’s own writings. My main thesis about Plato is a negative one: his doctrine does not in fact entail a commitment to immortality in the literal sense, i.e. temporally everlasting postmortem existence for all individual souls. The later philosophical tradition, which largely does understand “immortality” in this literal fashion, is thus founded on various misunderstandings or at any rate significant transformations of Plato’s ideas; in some cases these shifts can be traced back to specific moments in post-Platonic ancient philosophy, to which I will also give some selective consideration. My aim is to clarify and describe, rather than to defend or attack, the arguments proposed in favor of the immortality of the soul by Plato and his successors. The main philosophical (as opposed to merely historical) interest...
of this work lies in what the study of this particular tradition can tell us about the nature of philosophy itself as a human pursuit.

Arguments for the immortality of the soul are a kind of limiting case, in which the boundaries of the philosophical domain come constantly into question. Today theories about what happens to us after death might seem to belong more properly to the province of theology or religious belief than to philosophy at all. In thinking about the afterlife, the boundaries between philosophy and religion (in all its forms) are naturally particularly porous; although the ancients did sometimes distinguish between these two domains, this separation was in general less sharp for them than it is for us. Philosophy in the ancient world was seen as an entire way of life, sometimes including elements distinct from or even in tension with an overall commitment to reasoned investigation. One theme of this study will be the ancient antecedents and gradual explicit emergence of the opposition between “reason” and “faith” found in medieval Christian philosophy.

Looked at in another way, however, questions about the soul and our postmortem fate actually exemplify what is often taken to be a distinctive feature of all properly philosophical issues. This point is well formulated by the ancient doctor and philosopher Galen: “It is not at all surprising that most disagreements in philosophy have never ceased,” he says, since the questions that philosophy deals with—his examples are whether the cosmos had a beginning or whether there is more than one cosmos—“cannot be clearly judged by experiment.”

Philosophical disputes, which cannot be answered through appeals to “clear perception,” are thus different from practical disputes in medicine about what benefits or harms bodies, which experience can resolve. On this view, philosophical questions are precisely those that lie beyond the reach of empirical investigation. This boundary is fluid: technology today has in fact rendered Galen’s paradigmatic examples of disputed philosophical questions accessible to

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8 Cf. e.g. Cicero, *De natura deorum* III.5-7.
9 On ancient philosophy as a way of life, cf. Hadot 1987. Hadot’s emphasis on “spiritual exercises” is attacked by Cooper 2012, who develops a conception of ancient philosophy as a way of life based around a commitment to reason. Both authors represent an extreme position, which can only be maintained by ignoring certain texts or aspects of texts.
10 *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis* IX.6.20-22.
a certain kind of perception, making them sound more “scientific” than “philosophical.” But the question of whether we have immortal souls would seem to rest stably in the philosophical realm, given the recalcitrance of both soul and afterlife to empirical examination. To the extent that the question of the immortality of the soul can be investigated at all, this can only be through reasoned argumentation. This is not to say, however, that it can be investigated successfully in this way. Attempts to do so in fact may lead us rather to see the limits of rational argumentation.

Of course, philosophical disagreement involves not only the answers to questions but also the questions themselves. Both scholars and ordinary people sometimes speak as if there were certain “perennial” or “big” questions with a natural attractiveness to the human mind, such that every age and culture must take them on. This is perhaps true of some questions formulated at a very high level of generality (what happens to us after death?), but for more specific and idiosyncratic formulations (is the soul immortal?) this way of thinking is almost certainly false. Besides the fact that different cultures formulate meaningfully different questions, this view grossly underestimates the extent to which philosophical activity (however much it may pretend, explicitly or implicitly, to timeless objectivity) is always shaped by preceding traditions. The dogged interest of Western philosophers in the immortality of the soul was not inevitable: it was the contingent result of a long and complex textual transmission of ideas, beginning with Plato.\footnote{I am inspired in this way of thinking about the history of philosophy by Menn 1998.} So the study of Plato’s doctrine of the immortality of the soul and its transmission should also render us more attentive to another way in which philosophy is “limited,” namely the historical and cultural contingency of the basic questions that it poses.
1.2 Plato’s background and context

Plato obviously did not invent the ideas of the soul or the afterlife; versions of these are found in many if not all cultures, including that of the Greeks centuries before Plato’s birth. Yet when Socrates in Plato’s dialogues brings up the soul’s immortality, his interlocutors express doubt or surprise (cf. *Phaedo* 70a-b, *Republic* 608d). Was there then something new about this idea, and if so, what was it? The history of the soul and the afterlife in early Greece is a vast and complex topic. Here I can only sketch the most important elements of Plato’s intellectual context.

In our earliest works of Greek literature, the Homeric epics, the soul (ψυχή, henceforth psukhe) is already presented as something that survives death. It is a kind of life-breath, an implicitly corporeal stuff present within a living human and put at risk when a warrior goes into battle. Upon death it leaves the body and flies down to Hades, where it continues to exist along with or as a shadowy image of the deceased. Despite this form of survival, the notion that the human soul is immortal is deeply alien to the basic Homeric worldview. During life the psukhe is not the bearer of thoughts or emotions, which are assigned to other mental organs or entities (like the φρήν or the θυμός), nor is the psukhe treated as equivalent to the individual human being or self. The existence of the soul after death is thus a bleak one with little appeal or ethical significance for Homer’s characters. Homer tellingly also never calls the psukhe “immortal.” The Greek word in question (ἀθάνατος, literally, “deathless”) is reserved in the epics as an epithet for the “gods who are always,” who enjoy an everlasting and blessed life free from cares.

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12 For a broad survey of Western afterlife beliefs, see Segal 2004 (although the treatment of ancient Greece is not reliable in all details).
14 In the proem of the *Iliad* (I.3-4), the poet strikingly says that the souls (ψυχάς) of heroes were thrown down to Hades, but that the heroes themselves (αὐτοὺς δὲ) were left as prey for animals on the battlefield. As Achilles later puts it, “there is indeed a ψυχή and an εἴδωλον in the house of Hades, but φρένες are not in them at all” (*Iliad* XXIII.103-104).
15 For more on ancient terminology related to immortality, see Appendix 2.
Plato was not, however, the first to think of immortality as something possible for humans. The first reference in Greek literature to the immortality of the soul occurs in Herodotus (writing in the late fifth century BCE), in a description of the beliefs of the Egyptians:

The Egyptians were the first to give the account that the soul of a human being is immortal (ὡς ἀνθρώπου ψυχὴ ἀθάνατος ἐστι) and that when the body perishes the soul goes into whatever other animal is being born. When it has gone through all the land animals and sea animals and winged animals, it enters again into a human body. This cycle takes place over three thousand years. There are some Greeks who have also held this account, some earlier, some later, as their own view. I know their names but will not write them. (II.123)

The unnamed Greeks to whom Herodotus refers probably belonged to a diverse and for us obscure range of movements and cults beginning in the sixth century BCE and still flourishing in Plato’s day. Of the many groups maintaining cultic practices connected with the afterlife—for instance the so-called “mysteries” prominent at Athens—not all were in the business of, as Herodotus puts it, holding a *logos* about their beliefs. Among those that were, the likelihood that there was a wide degree of syncretism makes it difficult to identify distinctive contributions.

Two groups do seem to have been especially important for Plato. One was made up of the followers of Pythagoras of Samos (ca. 570-490 BCE), who apparently taught that the soul was immortal and cyclically reincarnated into various living beings. Plato knew the Pythagoreans as practicing a distinctive “way of life” derived from the sayings of their master (cf. *Republic 600a-b*). The other movement is today known as Orphism, after its mythical founder, the poet Orpheus. Although its existence as a coherent and distinct sect has been doubted, Plato knows of a group of Ὠρφικοί who practice vegetarianism (*Laws 782c*),

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16 According to Aristotle (quoted by Synesius, *Dio* 8.42-43), those initiated into the Athenian mysteries “are not supposed to learn anything (μαθεῖν τί), but rather to have an experience and a feeling” (παθεῖν καὶ διατεθῆναι). Translations of the main texts about the ancient mysteries (including those of later antiquity) are helpfully collected in Meyer 1987.

17 Burkert 1985, 276-304 gives a full discussion of the complex interrelationships involved.

18 Burkert 1972, 120: “That Pythagoras taught the doctrine of metempsychosis is generally regarded, and rightly, as the one most certain fact in the history of early Pythagoreanism.” For more discussion, see Barnes 1982, 100-120, who also sees views about the afterlife as the principal intellectual contribution of Pythagoras.

19 For a recent, very generous assessment of Pythagoras’s impact on Plato, see Horky 2013.
which possibly suggests a belief in reincarnation in animals. Plato moreover often mentions Orpheus, making him an authority specifically on the afterlife and sometimes quoting from poems attributed to him.\footnote{Cf. Apology 41a, Ion 536b, Protagoras 315b, Cratylus 400c and 402b, Republic 364e, Philebus 66c. Plato’s relationship to Orphism is given an exhaustive survey in Bernabé 2011.} These poems appear to have been theogonies; we possess a papyrus that preserves the remains of a commentary, from the fourth century BCE, on one such text.\footnote{For a text and translation, with discussion, of the so-called Derveni papyrus, cf. Betegh 2004.} Also associated with Orphism are inscribed gold tablets found in graves (mostly from the 4th century BCE), which contain cryptic instructions for cultic initiates to make their way to in the underworld after death and obtain a blessed existence.\footnote{Texts and translations of the Orphic tablets are found, along with discussion, in Edmonds 2011.}

One important pre-Platonic thinker influenced by these traditions, especially Pythagoreanism, was Empedocles (ca. 492-432 BCE), from Akragas in Sicily.\footnote{Whether and in what sense Empedocles should be called a “philosopher” is a complex question; for a challenging assessment, see Kingsley 1993.} In the substantial surviving fragments of his hexameter poem or poems, he develops an elaborate theory of reincarnation into various mortal beings as a kind of punishment. But he is not an advocate for the immortality of the soul in any strict sense.\footnote{Cf. fragments 115 and 35 Diels-Kranz, and Inwood 2001, 55-68.} His cosmology posits a periodic dissolution of everything into the four basic elements, thus precluding the permanent survival of anything: even his gods are described as merely “long-lived” (δολιχαίωνες). The word psukhe moreover appears only once in the extant fragments, apparently meaning (as is common in the period) merely “life.”

The one thinker prior to Plato sometimes credited with something like a deductive argument for the immortality of the soul is Alcmaeon, a little-known figure from Croton in southern Italy, who probably also had some connection to or familiarity with Pythagorean circles. The earliest evidence concerning his theory of the soul occurs in Aristotle’s De anima, where we hear that Alcmaeon:

...says that the soul is immortal on account of being like the immortals. This belongs to it as something that is always in motion. For all the divine things are always constantly moved: the moon, the sun, the stars, and the whole heaven. (405a30-b1)
The connection made here between theories about the human soul and cosmological speculation is intriguing. On the basis of this and three other later testimonia, some have thought that we can reconstruct for Alcmaeon a complex argument for the immortality of the soul, which Plato in fact adopted as his own in the *Phaedrus* (cf. § 3.3). This gives Alcmaeon too much credit; the report in the *De anima* is sketchy, and Aristotle may well already be interpreting Alcmaeon in light of Plato’s texts.

Finally, what of the influence on Plato of his mentor Socrates? This question might seem unpromising to pursue, since the portrayals of Socrates in the writings of those who knew him—Aristophanes and Xenophon, in addition to Plato—are problematic as historical sources: the relevant texts are literary works with their own agendas and priorities. The best evidence probably comes from the comedies of Aristophanes, where, as Claus has shown, appearances of the term *psukhe* are disproportionately common in contexts where Socrates is involved: of the twenty-five instances of the word in eleven plays, six are in the *Clouds* (produced in 423 BCE), which also contains several episodes whose comic effect might depend on a popular association of Socrates with talk about the *psukhe*.

Whereas *psukhe* earlier meant merely “life-force” or even just “life,” Socrates is sometimes credited with being the first to make the *psukhe* responsible for cognitive and emotional life and the bearer of virtues and moral qualities. This is likely an exaggeration, as this way of thinking about the soul is already present (if marginally) in other Greek texts from the fifth century BCE, notably in Euripides. Probably a circle of Athenian intellectuals including Socrates collectively developed and popularized this more intellectual conception of the *psukhe*. The classic expression of the supposed “Socratic” view of the soul is found in Plato’s *Apology*, where Socrates claims that he spends his time persuading people “not to care for their bodies or their wealth as much as for their soul, that it should be as excellent as possible” (30a-b). He associates this caring for the soul (ἐπιμελεία τῆς ψυχῆς) with caring

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26 Claus 1981, 137-159. The episodes in question are *Clouds* 319-321, 709-722. Cf. also *Birds* 1555.  
27 So Burnet 1916.  
28 Cf. *Hippoletus* 1006 and fragment 388 Nauck.
for “intelligence and truth,” for “virtue,” and for one’s “self” as opposed to one’s property (cf. 29e, 31b, 41e, 36c). At the same time, however, Socrates does not hold the view that the soul is immortal: he in fact claims not to know what happens after death and views an afterlife as just one possible outcome (29a-b, 40b-e, cf. § 6.1).

Xenophon’s credibility as a witness to Socrates and his relationship to Plato’s writings are debated, but in any event, the picture that emerges from his Socratic writings accords closely with what we find in Plato’s Apology: Xenophon’s Socrates shows some special interest in the soul, but advances no theory of its immortality. Whether we take Xenophon’s writing as independent testimony to the beliefs of the historical Socrates or as an implicit critical response to Plato (and his attribution of a doctrine of psychic immortality to Socrates in dialogues like the Phaedo), this omission is striking, especially since Xenophon has another one of his historical characters, Cyrus, express just before his death a tentative belief in the postmortem existence of the soul separate from the body (Cyropaedia VIII.7.17-22).

An economical conclusion from all of this might seem to be that Plato arrived at his doctrine by combining various cultic beliefs about the afterlife with Socrates’ conception of the soul, which stressed its importance and need for care, but not its postmortem existence. On my view, while this narrative does account for some aspects of Plato’s presentation of his doctrine, it must also be an over-simplification, if indeed Plato is not committed to the soul’s literal postmortem survival in the way that the Pythagoreans or the Orphics were. Although Plato certainly did draw on the language and ideas of these cultic groups, the legacy of Socrates was much more decisive for his thinking. (From this point on, all my references to Socrates, unless otherwise noted, will refer to Plato’s literary character, not the historical figure.)

For a detailed and sophisticated assessment of Xenophon as a witness to Socrates, see the introductory essay by Dorion in Bandini and Dorion 2011. For the general importance accorded by Xenophon’s Socrates to the soul, cf. Memorabilia I.4.13, IV.3.14., and Claus 1981, 162. The closest that Xenophon’s Socrates comes to suggesting the postmortem existence of the soul is in an interesting passage at Memorabilia I.2.51-55, which may depend on the Phaedo.
Against this background of earlier traditions about the soul and the afterlife, Plato’s originality in this area is often taken to lie in his having been the first to argue for the soul’s immortality. Cicero gives a representative statement of this view in the Tusculan Disputations: Plato, he says, “was the first, with regard to the eternality of souls, not only to think (sensisse) the same thing as Pythagoras, but also to provide an argument (rationem) for it” (I.38-39). Cicero is correct in that no one before Plato (with the possible exception of Alcmaeon) seems to have proposed something like a deductive argument to prove that the soul is immortal. Since the use of deductive arguments is today viewed as a defining characteristic of “philosophy,” it is tempting to contrast Plato “the philosopher” with mere cultic or religious figures like Pythagoras. This contrast may or may not be fair to Pythagoras and his ilk—this question lies beyond this work—but it certainly rests, as we will see, on an incomplete and anachronistic view of Plato’s conception of philosophy.

1.3 Reception and development of Plato’s views in antiquity

Plato’s doctrine of the immortality of the soul did not immediately receive an enthusiastic response in the ancient philosophical community. In fact, a century after Plato’s death in 347 BCE, no philosophical school in Athens maintained a commitment to the doctrine. I will first sketch the response from other philosophical groups before turning to the more complex case of the school founded by Plato himself, the Academy. This will lead to how the doctrine was revived during the period of Roman hegemony.

Aristotle began as Plato’s student and a member of the Academy, before founding his own school (the Lyceum or the Peripatetics). His views on the immortality of the soul have long been the subject of controversy. Despite his obvious familiarity with Plato’s dialogues, Aristotle’s psychological treatises strikingly contain no thematic discussion of whether the human soul is immortal, and he elsewhere characterizes immortality as impossible for human beings (Nicomachean Ethics III.2, 1111b22-23). On the other hand, in one brief and cryptic chapter in the De anima (III.5), Aristotle does claim that the “active intellect” is “immortal
and eternal.” It was debated already in antiquity whether the intellect (νοῦς) referred to there is the divine intellect, i.e. the prime mover described in *Metaphysics* Λ, or an aspect or part of the individual human.\(^1\) On the former reading, Aristotle does not accord any kind of immortality to the human soul; on the latter, one limited aspect of the human soul would survive death. It is at any rate clear that Aristotle was much less interested than Plato in immortality, and many of his successors in the Lyceum (Strato, Aristoxenus, Dicaearchus) were outright hostile to Plato’s view.\(^2\)

Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, also began his career in the Academy. The physics that Zeno developed ruled out permanent postmortem psychic survival: on the Stoic view, the individual human soul is a corporeal thing, a part or “offshoot” of the larger world soul, into which it is eventually reincorporated. Some Stoics do seem to have conceded postmortem survival to the soul as an earned reward for a virtuous life, but only on a temporary basis.\(^3\) The other main Hellenistic school, that of Epicurus, emphatically rejected all aspects of the Platonic doctrine of immortality and held that the soul (which they, like the Stoics, considered to be a bodily thing) was dispersed immediately upon death.

What of Plato’s own school, the Academy? Writing in the first century BCE, Cicero describes how it developed in two radically different directions during the century after Plato’s death:

> The Academics have one name, but two different points of view. Speusippus, the son of Plato’s sister, and Xenocrates, who was Plato’s student, and Polemo and Crantor, who studied under Xenocrates, all disagreed to no significant extent with Aristotle, who also studied under Plato—though they were perhaps not Aristotle’s equals as to richness and elegance of language. Arcesilaus, who studied under Polemo, was the first to take as the main point from Plato’s various books and Socratic conversations that there is nothing certain that can be grasped with either the senses or the mind. They

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\(^1\) There is an enormous literature on *De anima* III.5. For a recent contribution, to the spirit of which I am sympathetic and which includes references to earlier discussions, see Caston 1999. The ancient sources relevant to the dispute are helpfully collected in translation in Sorabji 2003, I.102-118.

\(^2\) Trenchant criticisms of the arguments in Plato’s *Phaedo* by Strato, the third head of the Lyceum, are preserved by Damascius (*In Phaedonem I*, previously attributed to Olympiodorus). They are collected in Wehrli 1966 and translated by Hackforth 1955, 195-198. The views of Aristoxenus and Dicaearchus are mentioned in various places in the first book of Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*; cf. Gottschalk 1971, 182-185.

\(^3\) Ju 2009, 116 takes this a sign of Platonic influence. For detailed discussion of Stoic views on the afterlife, see Hoven 1971, 39-85.
say that he had a wonderful charm in speaking, scorned every judgment of mind and sense, and was the first—although this was typical of Socrates—to make a practice of not showing what he himself thought, but arguing against whatever other people said that they thought. (De oratore III.67)

The Academy in the first phase that Cicero describes—under its four leaders after Plato: Speusippus, Xenocrates, Polemo, and Crates—is known as the “Old Academy.” Our evidence for the school in this period is scanty (the works written by its leaders, which Cicero delicately hints were not very engaging, are now lost). It maintained a variety of dogmatic positions that it associated with Plato, including the doctrine of the immortal soul—though exactly how they understood the doctrine is not very clear. In the middle of the third century BCE, however, the scholarch Arcesilaus turned the Academy towards a kind of skepticism derived from the practices of Socrates, from which time the immortality of the soul must have ceased to be openly taught. This so-called “New Academy” (of which Cicero is himself an adherent) maintained a variety of skeptical views, primarily in opposition to the Stoics, until the middle of the first century BCE, when it collapsed as an institution due to a complex combination of factors, including the sack of Athens by the Roman general Sulla in 86 BCE.

A revival of interest in Plato’s doctrines, in the spirit of the Old Academy rather than the New, began to occur in the first and second centuries CE. This revival was based on the study of Plato’s texts, in particular the Timaeus. (The arrangement of the Platonic dialogues into tetralogies, still commonly used today, originated in an edition made in this period by the astrologer Thrasyllus). Most of the revival’s major figures came from and

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34 A survey of the Old Academy is found in Dillon 1996, 11-51.
35 The key piece of evidence related to the immortality of the soul in the Old Academy is discussed in §3.4. Xenocrates is also credited with some λόγοι ὑπὲρ ἀθανασίας in pseudo-Lucian, Praise of Demosthenes 47, but this is a very late text and likely does not reflect any actual acquaintance with Xenocrates’ works.
36 Cicero, Tusculan Disputations I, which includes an extended discussion of the immortality of the soul, is declared by Dillon 1996, 96-101 to be “an important document in the history of Middle Platonism” that reflects the dogmatic influence of the Old Academy. This verdict underestimates Cicero’s originality in his appropriation of Plato (cf. Stull 2012) and also the complex structure of the text, with its various incompatible arguments designed to persuade the reader that death is not an evil. To me this text reflects a kind of “therapeutic skepticism” that was probably common in the late New Academy.
were active outside of Greece. This institutional discontinuity corresponds to a shift in the terminology found in ancient sources. The followers of Plato in the Old and New Academies are always referred to exclusively as “Academics” (Ἀκαδημικοί, Academici, and so on) but by the second century CE these terms basically ceased to be used as self-descriptions or to refer to contemporary figures. Instead, our sources begin to speak of contemporaries as “Platonists” (Πλατωνικός or Platonici)—at first scholars or commentators on Platonic texts, later adherents of a philosophical school.

Most Platonist works from the first two centuries of our era are lost with the exception of the vast output of Plutarch of Chaeronea (ca. 45-120 CE), who, however, does not have much to say on the immortality of the soul. Also belonging in this period (although little else is known about them) are Alcinous, author of a handbook of Platonist philosophy known as the Didaskalikos, which we will examine at several points, and Atticus, whose main work was called something like Against those who interpret Plato through Aristotle, as we know from Eusebius (cf. Preparation for the Gospel XI.1.2), who quotes from it extensively, including the following interesting report on the immortality of the soul:

> It is clear not only to those who philosophize, but even to practically all ordinary people (σχεδὸν καὶ τοῖς ἰδιώταις ἅπασιν), that Plato left behind the view that the soul is immortal, having written much on this topic, demonstrating the soul’s immortality in elaborate and varied ways. And much love of honor has come about among those

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37 Gluckert 1978, 225: “The Platonism that we encounter in the second century A.D. had its roots in a philosophical movement which arose in the East—mainly in Asia Minor and Syria—and had nothing to do, for its first hundred years or so, with any school, institution, or movement in Athens. ... Middle Platonism arose in the East. Neo-Platonism originated in Alexandria and Rome, and some considerable time was to elapse before it was introduced into Athens.” We should of course be wary of “Orientalist” narratives perhaps lurking implicitly behind Gluckert’s account, which portray Platonism as the product of “Eastern” influences corrupting “Greek rationalism.” But the point can be put in a more acceptable way: Platonism did not evolve in a close-knit and highly competitive local philosophical community in the way that the Hellenistic schools did. One result of this is that Platonism became a scholastic, commentary tradition in which Plato’s own texts were accorded a quasi-scriptural authority; it was also engaged with non-philosophical, cultic discourses from all around the Roman Empire.

38 As masterfully shown by Gluckert 1978, 206-225.

39 The few early uses of Πλατωνικός/Platonicus (in e.g. Cicero, De natura deorum I.21 and I.73, De officiis I.2) refer to Plato himself or his writings.

40 Modern scholars often refer to this period as “Middle Platonism” (as opposed to later “Neoplatonism”). See Dillon 1996 on “Middle Platonism” in general. Deuse 1983 is a treatment of Platonist views on the soul specifically up to Porphyry.

41 For what he does have to say, see Bonazzì 2010.
who have made a precise and serious study of Plato’s thought as they fight together on behalf of the doctrine and of Plato—for this is pretty much what holds together the man’s whole school (τὴν πᾶσαν αἵρεσιν τἀνδρός). For it is from the soul’s immortality that there follows the basis of his ethical doctrines, that what is great and shining and splendid in virtue can be preserved because the soul is divine, while all things in nature are able to be well-managed in accordance with the management of soul. ... But Plato also connected what he says about knowledge and wisdom to the immortality of the soul, for he thinks that all learning is recollection, and that in no other way can both searching and learning be preserved, from which knowledge comes to be. If the soul is not immortal, there is no recollection, and if no recollection, no learning. Since all of Plato’s doctrines (δογμάτων) are simply hung and suspended from the divinity and immortality (θειότητός τε καὶ ἀθανασίας) in the soul, anyone who does not accept this overturns the whole philosophy of Plato. (Preparation for the Gospel XV.9.1-5)

Atticus stresses the status of the immortality of the soul as a signature doctrine of Plato in the popular mind, a unifying point of agreement for the whole Platonist school, and the fundamental underlying principle for all areas of Plato’s philosophical system, including his ethics and physics and epistemology. (We will scrutinize aspects of this picture in the following chapters.)

The (for us) relatively dark period of the first and second centuries comes to an end with Plotinus (204-270 CE), commonly held to be the greatest and most original of the Platonists. He is the author of a collection of treatises known as the Enneads, including one “On the Immortality of the Soul” (IV.7). Some later Platonists who will be mentioned in this study include Plotinus’s student Porphyry (234-305), Porphyry’s student Iamblichus (ca. 245-325), Proclus (412-485), Damascius (ca. 458-538), and Olympiodorus (ca. 495-570). The surviving written output of these thinkers is mostly in the form of lectures or commentaries on Plato’s dialogues (including three, especially relevant for us, on Plato’s Phaedo). These

42 Atticus continues: “So who is the first who tried to oppose Plato’s proofs and take away from the soul immortality and all the rest of its power? Who else more than Aristotle? For of the rest, some [Stoics] allow the soul to persist for a long time, while others [Epicureans], even if they don’t grant that, at least allotted the soul power in the body and some movement and works and actions. But as much as Plato made the soul a glorious thing (ἀπεσέμνυνε τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς πρᾶγμα), showing it to be the principle of generation and the pupil of god and the leader of all things, so much did Aristotle in his love of quarreling strip the soul and dishonor it and practically show it to be nothing at all” (Preparation for the Gospel XV.9.6-7). This hostility to Aristotle clearly marks off Atticus from later Platonists, who were eager to show that Plato and Aristotle were in fundamental agreement.

43 The three extant Platonist commentaries on the Phaedo—one, incomplete, by Olympiodorus, and two now attributed to Damascius—are edited and translated in Westerink 1977 and discussed by Gertz 2011.
thinkers provided the main conduit through which “Plato’s” thought influenced Christian (and Jewish and Islamic) philosophy and theology in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. In many respects, however, what the Platonists taught went beyond or even against what is found in Plato’s dialogues.

The general view taken in this study of the nature and history of Platonism can be helpfully contrasted with one recently developed and defended at length by Gerson. For Gerson, “Platonism” is a genus term, under which are ranged all philosophical views that develop a positive response to a position that he calls “Ur-Platonism.” Gerson characterizes Ur-Platonism purely negatively, by listing a series of views that it opposes: Ur-Platonism is antimaterialism, antimechanism, antinominalism, antirelativism, and antiskepticism. Platonist thinkers are thus united by what they are against, but differ in precisely what they assert instead. Gerson takes Plato to have been the first to articulate both Ur-Platonism and a particular positive response. Plato is thus himself a Platonist (as, on Gerson’s view, is Aristotle).

Three differences between my position and Gerson’s are particularly important. The first is terminological: while Gerson delimits “Platonism” philosophically (as a type of view in principle open to any thinker in any period), I do so historically, using the term (following ancient usage) to refer specifically to philosophers in roughly the period 100-600 CE who identified themselves and were identified by others as followers of Plato. Plato is thus by definition not a Platonist. The second difference has to do with the history of the Academy: Gerson seeks to bolster the legitimacy of the Platonists as interpreters of Plato by positing a relationship of influence between the Old Academy and the revived Platonism of the imperial period, whether through the survival of writings by figures like Xenocrates or by the persistence of an oral tradition about Plato’s dogmatic teachings. I see no evidence for

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45 I will use the adjective “Platonic” for texts and views that can be attributed to Plato himself, “Academic” for those of the skeptical New Academy, and “Platonist” for those of later philosophers. I will refer to “Plato and the Platonists” when speaking of what is shared between the two.
46 Here Gerson follows Dillon 1996, who repeatedly asserts that the Old Academy was an important influence on Middle Platonism, but nowhere substantiates this view.
such continuity; as far as we know, the Platonists created their ideas largely from scratch on the basis of Plato’s dialogues. The third and most important difference has to do with the substantive interpretation of Plato: I doubt that he in fact embraces all aspects of the negative Ur-Platonist position that Gerson attributes to him. If this is right, then there is also a deep and non-trivial sense in which Plato is not a Platonist.

1.4 Method and scope of the study

Most of this study is naturally concerned with the interpretation of passages from Plato’s dialogues. A very large number of texts, found across the entire Platonic corpus, are relevant to questions about the soul and the afterlife, including seven more or less formal arguments for the immortality of the soul (four in the *Phaedo*, and one each in the *Meno*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*). Although I will usually base my order of exposition on the generally accepted chronology of Plato’s dialogues, nothing much will depend on this, and I will advance no claims about any development in Plato’s views. This is not because I think that the accepted chronology is wrong or view it as implausible in principle that Plato’s views evolved over time. Rather, with respect to the immortality of the soul, developmental hypotheses simply turn out to be of limited use. I am furthermore interested in exploring the range of philosophical resources—arguments, concepts, images—that Plato’s dialogues could supply to later ancient readers who did not approach Plato’s thought with any developmentalist framework in mind.

A relatively small portion of this work will be devoted to the logical analysis of Plato’s arguments; two of them (the so-called Cyclical Argument and the Final Argument, both in the *Phaedo*) will receive no dedicated treatment at all. A large literature devoted to attacking, defending, or improving the logical validity of these arguments already exists, and I doubt that much can be gained from ever more fine-grained analyses. I take it for granted that none of the arguments is successful: even if we grant that all their logical flaws can

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47For an account of the development of Platonism emphasizing discontinuity, see Dörrie 1976.

48For a careful examination of these arguments, cf. Barnes 1978 and Frede 1978 respectively.
be mended, the fundamental problem remains that Plato nowhere adequately addresses the questions of whether we have a soul at all and what kind of thing it is.

There is, however, a deeper question at stake here: what does it mean to talk about a successful argument at all, in particular with regard to an issue like postmortem existence? Consider a recent account of “successful arguments” by Oppy, in the context of a study of the closely related issue of arguments about the existence of god:

The most successful argument would be one that succeeds—or perhaps would or ought to succeed—in persuading any reasonable person to accept its conclusion; good, but less successful arguments would be ones that succeed—or perhaps would or ought to succeed—in persuading a non-zero percentage of reasonable people to accept their conclusions. However, as we shall now see, there are here many difficulties that lie just below the surface.

There are indeed many difficulties here, not all of which Oppy confronts. (Note that he does not think that there are any successful arguments for or against the existence of god.) The main difficulty for our purposes is the difference between “succeeds” and “would or ought to succeed.” Oppy seems to want to define a successful argument in terms of its power to persuade—rather than in terms of some objective, formal feature of the argument itself—but then is reluctant for this to be the whole story: he later concedes that since people can sometimes be irrational, “a measure of the worth of an argument can’t be taken directly from the rate of success that the argument has in persuading those who did not previously accept the conclusion.” This leads to further questions. What does it mean to be “reasonable” or “rational” or the reverse? What is it to “accept” an argument’s conclusion? In the case of beliefs concerning god and the soul—which are often deeply rooted in an individual’s psychology and experiences, and which can be the subject of uncertainty, doubt and struggle—it may be that Oppy’s terminology involves problematic idealizations.

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49 Do we have a soul? The question is (need it be said?) beyond the scope of this work. Contemporary philosophical treatments of the question so framed tend to be pieces of Christian apologetics more or less elaborately concealed with dialectical chain-mail; cf. Koons and Bealer (2010) and Baker and Goetz (2011).

50 This is the general assessment of Plato’s arguments found in Frede (1999), which (despite its allegedly introductory purpose) is the most careful and thought-provoking monograph on the Phaedo available; my debt to it (and disagreements with it) will be apparent throughout.


A concern with precisely these problems is at the heart of Plato’s philosophy, and for this reason a focus on the logical analysis of his arguments is in a deeper sense misguided. It is perhaps already anachronistic to speak of Plato’s “arguments” at all, as he usually employs only the much broader term *logos*. Unlike Aristotle, Plato does not develop or employ a technical account of argumentative validity (i.e. logic). As we will see, he treats philosophical *logoi* on a continuum with other forms of persuasive discourse, including rhetorical speeches and myths. The later philosophical tradition’s interest in offering demonstrative proofs of the immortality of the soul thus rests, in some sense, on a fundamental misunderstanding of Plato’s project. That Plato is more interested in the psychological rather than logical force of arguments is a partial explanation of why he chose to write in the form of dialogues—dramatized conversations between particular characters in particular situations. Plato never presents an argument in the abstract, detached from a specific human context.

Plato’s choice to write dialogues—in which he himself very rarely appears, and never as a speaking character—also makes it difficult and usually inappropriate to claim that he “endorses” or “is committed to” any particular view. We should never uncritically assume that Plato simply agrees with what any one of his characters, even Socrates, says. There are many (not mutually exclusive) reasons that Plato might put forward a view he disagrees with or would favor only with certain unexpressed qualifications, for instance in order to show how the view follows from certain other commitments or traits of his characters, to offer it as a socially salutary exoteric teaching, or to challenge a philosophical reader to offer criticism, (With regard to the last two points, it is important that Plato certainly does suggest that belief in immortality and an afterlife can be beneficial, at least for some people, by promoting virtuous behavior or mitigating the fear of death.)

Given this approach to the dialogues, my free talk of Plato’s “doctrine” (as well as the use of phrases like “Plato argues” or “in Plato’s view” as a convenient shorthand) may seem surprising. I use the terms “doctrine” and “teaching” to indicate any thesis that is passed

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^53 For a helpful discussion of this point see [Frede 1992](#).
down to a later tradition—which may then interpret, justify, or deploy it in very different ways. (It is in this sense that we might speak of the Christian “doctrine” of the trinity.) In the specific case of Plato, his “doctrines” are simply the ideas presented repeatedly and prominently across his dialogues, especially by Socrates or Plato’s other “spokesmen” (like Timaeus), such that anyone attempting to be a “Platonist” would have to have some sort of position on them. I do not mean to imply by my use of this term that Plato himself endorses all of these notions in a dogmatic way or that the sometimes incompatible presentations across the dialogues conceal a final, systematic view.

Some interpreters go so far as to claim that Plato’s authorial anonymity and use of the dialogue form mean that he in general has no positive philosophical views, or at least none that he communicates in his dialogues. This view gets something important right, but in its extreme form is misguided. Plato absolutely does have “doctrines” in the limited sense just described (e.g. immortality, the tripartite soul, recollection, the theory of Forms, punishment as correction, the Socratic paradoxes, and so on). The dogmatic Platonist interpretation of Plato is hardly an outrageous or naïve reaction to his texts: on the contrary, it is an attempt to systematize ideas and images to which Plato gives deliberate emphasis. Moreover, if we do take seriously Plato’s use of the dialogue form (as the Platonists largely do not), the claim that Plato really has no (firm or final) views of his own has implications that are seldom discussed. “Having no views” is itself a philosophical position of sorts. The skepticism of the New Academy was an attempt to work out just such a position, doubtless inspired in part by Plato’s authorial anonymity and the dramatic dimension of the dialogues.

The Academics and the Platonists were thus both responding to particular aspects of Plato’s philosophy as expressed in his writings. The productive reception of Plato’s ideas in later ancient philosophy, however, was hardly restricted to these two groups: it is not an exaggeration to say that all later ancient philosophy is a reaction to Plato—with the exception of the Epicureans, in some sense a friendly reaction. (Aristotle and Zeno, after all,

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54 For the scholarly controversy surrounding such views, see the essays collected in Pres 2000.
both began their careers in the Academy and obviously took up many important ideas and problems from Plato’s dialogues.) In this work I will often turn to different parts of this later tradition for a variety of purposes: sometimes to illustrate Plato’s influence, sometimes to emphasize the (often unacknowledged) gap between Plato and the later Platonist tradition, and sometimes merely to use a later idea as a heuristic aid in interpreting a view found in the dialogues. Let me emphasize that it is not at all my ambition to give a comprehensive survey or even a representative sample of what all ancient philosophers after Plato thought and wrote about the immortality of the soul: I have simply tried to select texts and ideas that can be juxtaposed with Platonic ones in interesting and revealing ways.

An obvious but important restriction on the scope of this study is that I consider only philosophical texts. One reason that the idea of the immortality of the soul is particularly worthy of study is the influence that it has had on popular belief and culture in the later West. (Its influence on popular belief in pagan antiquity appears to have been minimal, judging by the evidence of funerary inscriptions.\textsuperscript{55}) But tracing the conduits and extent of this popular influence, as well as assessing the specific importance of the Platonist philosophical tradition in comparison to other sources of afterlife beliefs, like Jewish and Christian scriptural texts, is entirely beyond the scope of this work. The existence of popular beliefs about the afterlife is, after all, hardly surprising; what is more interesting is the enduring attraction of such ideas to the allegedly critical and rigorous “philosophical mind.” A consequence of my focus on philosophical texts from antiquity is that all of the thinkers I will were consider were men of a more or less elite background, a fact that constantly informs their conception and practice of philosophy. Women and members of marginalized groups in ancient culture may have approached the same questions in quite different ways, about which we can for the most part only speculate.

\textsuperscript{55}See Lattimore 1942 and Obryk 2012.
1.5 Argument of the study

A wide range of sometimes incompatible conceptions of immortality are found in Plato’s dialogues. For the general formal reasons outlined in the previous section, it is inappropriate to claim that any of these represent Plato’s own considered and final view. The later philosophical and theological tradition generally took Plato to be asserting the immortality of the soul in a literal sense, i.e. temporally everlasting postmortem existence for all individual souls. Such a conception of immortality is certainly to be found in Plato’s dialogues, but it is far from the only one. Ultimately Plato seems more interested in a range of non-literal forms of immortality. These include conceptions of immortality that do not actually involve the postmortem survival of the soul at all, like posthumous survival merely in the memory of the living or (an idea that I see as particularly important for Plato) immortality in the sense of an earthly existence with an “immortal” (i.e. divine) quality of blessedness. Some of what Plato says also suggests that the soul could enjoy a merely temporary existence after death, or be everlasting but not correspond uniquely to a former human individual, i.e. by being merged into a larger entity. Two other interesting possibilities raised by Plato but generally neglected in the subsequent tradition influenced by Christianity are that postmortem existence implies or requires prenatal existence, and that not all souls are immortal, but only a select few who somehow earn it.\(^\text{56}\)

I begin, in the next chapter, by considering a passage from Plato’s Phaedo known as the Affinity Argument. Although often viewed as a weak argument—correctly, at least as far as proving immortality in a literal sense is concerned—this is the single most important text for understanding both Plato’s doctrine and its later reception. It is traditionally read as supporting the claim that the soul’s nature is bodiless or incorporeal, and thus indestructible and immortal; the Platonist tradition rightly saw this approach, beginning from the nature of the Forms (not the soul) exist outside of time in the Timaeus (37c-38c), in this passage time is tied to the motions of the heavens and is thus not equivalent to simple duration.

\(^{56}\)One tempting idea that to my mind Plato does not entertain is that the soul exists after death but in a non-temporal way. Whittaker[1968] has shown that Plato does not have a concept of non-durational eternity at all: while it is true that Plato says that the Forms (not the soul) exist outside of time in the Timaeus (37c-38c), in this passage time is tied to the motions of the heavens and is thus not equivalent to simple duration.
of the soul, as the most promising avenue for a philosophical proof of psychic immortality. But this is a misreading of Plato’s text: the real thrust of the Affinity Argument, I argue, is to claim that the soul is somehow related or akin to the Forms. Although the latter are incorporeal, immortal, and divine, Socrates does not claim that the soul itself is any of these things. Plato thus does not in fact propose what might seem to be the most (the only?) viable argument available for the literal immortality of the soul. In the rest of the chapter, I first substantiate the claim that Plato does not hold the soul to be incorporeal by examining discussions of the soul elsewhere in his corpus. I then offer an account of how a misunderstanding of his view arose in the Old Academy and among the Platonists. I suggest that a possible reading of Plato’s texts is that the soul is composed of a stuff that is corporeal, but distinct from the four standard elements (earth, water, air, and fire). This would allow for a temporary and perhaps non-individuated survival of the soul after death.

In the third chapter, I consider the question of how psychic immortality relates to Plato’s doctrine of psychic tripartition, according to which the soul contains three distinct centers of motivation (reason, spirit, and appetite). Since antiquity there has been debate about whether Plato intends for the whole soul to be immortal, or just the rational part. Based on an examination of relevant passages in the Republic, Timaeus, and Phaedrus, in which the doctrines of immortality and tripartition are juxtaposed, I argue that the traditional framing of the question misses what is really at stake: what is a human being, and to what extent is reason constitutive of it? Given how divinity and immortality are closely linked in Greek thought, I develop the idea that living a philosophical life devoted to reason could count as earning a certain kind of non-literal immortality, i.e. an earthly life similar to that of the gods. I further suggest that Plato is actually surprisingly ambivalent about this as an ethical aspiration. I contrast his position with that of Platonists like Plotinus, who unambiguously stress the divinity of reason and its primacy within the human being (and who also seem committed to immortality in the literal sense). In this chapter I also address,
somewhat in passing, a theme that will perhaps seem underappreciated in this work, namely reincarnation.

The fourth chapter places the doctrine of the immortality of the soul in the context of Plato’s moral and political philosophy, by examining how he uses the doctrine to underwrite belief in an afterlife involving rewards and punishments. Here his characters employ “myths” that pose complex problems of interpretation. After some general observations about Plato and myth and how his myths were received in the later ancient tradition, I examine in detail, *exempli gratia*, the description of the afterlife at the end of the *Gorgias*. I argue that fear of punishment in the afterlife cannot really serve as an incentive to virtuous behavior, given Plato’s views, developed elsewhere, about the corrective function of punishment and about what constitutes true, philosophical virtue. Myths focusing on postmortem punishment therefore must be directed at the non-philosophical, in order to provide an incentive for them to develop a deficient, “popular” virtue. I then turn to a very different myth found in the tenth book of the *Laws*, which I argue serves a related function for a more philosophically astute readership.

In the fifth chapter I identify a similar pragmatic motivation behind Plato’s theory of recollection, whereby we latently possess (and can reactivate) certain truths. This theory links the immortality of the soul to Plato’s other main metaphysical doctrine, the theory of Forms. The examination of recollection is thus a chance to elaborate on the meaning of the claim, discussed in the first two chapters, that the soul has a special relationship to the divine and the intelligible. The result I reach is surprising: this relationship is actually a very distant one, as our knowledge of the Forms in our embodied state is at best dim and imperfect. I show first of all that Socrates’ attempts in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo* to use recollection to argue for the soul’s immortality fail. Rather, recollection is a mythical idea that itself presupposes belief in the immortality of the soul. As such, it functions as a psychological device that responds to some issues arising from Socrates’ way of philosophizing through
(aporetic) searches for definitions of ethical terms—issues similar to ones that later ancient skeptics had to face.

In the sixth chapter I confront an obvious objection to my main thesis. Plato’s Socrates offers various arguments (many of which seem seriously flawed) in support the immortality of the soul, apparently understood in a literal sense. What is the status of these arguments, and if my overall readings is right, are they not seriously misleading? Why does Plato put forward bad arguments for a false view? In reply I suggest that even weak arguments for literal immortality might still have a therapeutic value as protection against the fear of death. I pursue this suggestion through a reading of an important passage in the *Phaedo* in which Socrates warns his listeners against becoming “misologists, i.e. haters of *logoi*. Noting how Socrates here admits that he is trying to convince himself of the soul’s immortality, I argue that Plato is the earliest advocate of a pragmatic argument for belief in an afterlife, i.e. an argument appealing to the benefits of holding a belief even if it cannot be shown to be true. The work that the metaphors of sickness and health do in this passage in the *Phaedo*, however, is somewhat surprising. Typically a “therapeutic” argument is meant to “cure” a “sickness,” understood as some form of irrationality. But Socrates here in fact treats “health” as a prerequisite for the correct evaluation of arguments. I argue that this move can be understood as a skeptical tactic aimed at destabilizing the standards of rationality. I conclude by exploring how this passage in the *Phaedo* may have influenced the development of ancient skepticism.

The seventh chapter offers a brief treatment of the Christian reception of Plato’s doctrine of the immortality of the soul. My focus is very selective, aimed at exemplifying important differences and exploring interesting parallels. After an overview of the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body, I turn to Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* and his perceptive criticism of Plato on the immortality of the soul. In the rest of the chapter, I examine the *Soliloquies* of Augustine. I dwell in particular on his appropriation of the metaphorical field of health and sickness with regard to arguments for a radically different
end than Socrates in the *Phaedo*. Here we witness the development of the idea, common in medieval philosophy, that religious faith is necessary for certain kinds of philosophical understanding.

Plato’s doctrine of the immortality of the soul is a nodal point that links many different aspects of his philosophy, including his metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology. Its legacy in the Western tradition has been complex, involving both a philosophical interest in the quixotic project of proving the postmortem survival of the soul and a broader cultural fascination with immortality as an appropriate object of desire and striving. A close consideration of Plato’s texts reveals a considerable gap between the origin and this legacy. The history of Platonism is, in more ways than one, the “history of an error.”

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57 All translations from Greek and Latin in what follow are my own, made from the standard critical texts (unless otherwise noted, the most recent Oxford edition, where this is available). In quoting exchanges from “narrated” Platonic dialogues like the *Republic*, I silently convert them to “dramatic” form for the reader’s convenience. Only a few Greek words (those occurring most commonly in the main text) are transliterated (*logos*, *muthos*, *polis*, *eros*, and so on). My policies on proper names and names of works are consistent but unsystematic; I have used the forms that seem most natural to me, e.g. anglicizing all titles of works unless they are widely known by a Latin title beginning with a preposition (e.g. *De anima*, *De trinitate*).
2 The Incorporeality of the Soul

“Must we not ask ourselves something like this, namely, to what sort of thing (τῷ ποίῳ τινὶ) it belongs to suffer the affection of being scattered—that is, for what sort of thing one should be afraid that it will suffer this or not—and after that examine which sort of thing soul is, and on the basis of this be confident or afraid for our own soul?” (Phaedo 78b).

Socrates’ question introduces a section of Plato’s Phaedo known as the Affinity Argument. This argument is presented as a response to Cebes’ worry that the soul could be “scattered,” as if by the wind, upon leaving the body at death (77d-78b). Whatever the merits of the argument as a proof of the postmortem survival of the soul, Socrates’ opening question, at least, seems sensible and cogent. In contrast to the other proofs found in the Phaedo, the Affinity Argument promises to examine the possibility of immortality on the basis of a view of the nature of the soul. Indeed, this is the only moment in the Phaedo at which Socrates appears to intend to honor a principle that he himself elsewhere strongly insists on, namely that the being or essence of a thing must be investigated separately from and prior to its qualities or affections.

What sort of thing, then, must the soul be in order to be immortal? Ancient and moderns have often taken Plato’s answer to this question (in the Affinity Argument and elsewhere) to be that the soul is incorporeal, i.e. not any sort of body, not composed of the same stuffs

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1 Olympidorus calls it “the argument from similarity” (ὁ ἐκ τῆς ὁμοιότητος λόγος, In Phaedonem 13.1).
2 Cf. Euthyphro 11a (οὐσία vs. πάθος), Meno 71b (πί ἔστω vs. ὑπόσταν), Republic 354c. Note that here in the Phaedo Socrates asks “what sort of thing” (ποίος τις) the soul is, rather than simply what it is, making it doubtful whether he intends to give a strict definition of soul. Cf. Robinson 1995, 32: “The remarkable thing is that the same Socrates who is so adamant about the correctness of definition in ethical discourse in the so-called ‘Socratic’ dialogues makes so little attempt to give a coherent and internally consistent definition of the soul in the Phaedo.”

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as the human or animal body that it animates. Despite its difficulties, this notion has been extremely influential in later Western philosophy. The purpose of this chapter is to scrutinize not its philosophical viability, but rather its historical origin. I argue that the common view of its origin is mistaken: the notion that the soul is incorporeal and the attribution of this position to Plato are both products of the later philosophical tradition.

In Greek literary and philosophical texts prior to Plato, the psukhe is generally spoken of as made of some fine or gaseous stuff. But in holding such a view, whether implicitly or explicitly, pre-Platonic thinkers certainly did not see themselves as opposing a view of the soul as bodiless or incorporeal. The very notion of “body” (σῶμα, henceforth soma) as a unified ontological category was, as we will see, still evolving in this period. Plato was very likely the first thinker to consider the possibility of incorporeal entities—namely, the Forms. In his dialogues, however, he never ascribes incorporeality to the soul, which instead has an intermediate status in between Forms and corporeal, perceptible things. After Plato’s death, the Stoics and the Epicureans both emphatically declared the soul to be a body. Though the Hellenistic schools were thus in superficial agreement with the pre-Socratics, their explicitly corporealist ontology was in fact only possible as a reaction against Plato’s introduction of the incorporeal as an ontological category. The defenses of the soul’s incorporeality in the later Platonist tradition were in turn only possible as a reaction against a view of the soul as bodily, promoted above all by the Stoics.

3 A note on terminology: I use “bodily” and “corporeal” interchangeably in this chapter, and likewise “bodiless” and “incorporeal.” I reserve the terms “material” and “immaterial” for post-Platonic contexts where an explicit concept of “matter” (ὕλη) is in play. (In Stoic thought the distinction between “material” and “corporeal” is quite significant.) I never use “physical” or “non-physical,” since these terms might have misleading associations in an ancient context.

4 Aristotle catalogues philosophical views about the soul in De anima I.2: Democritus thought that it was fiery and made of small spherical atoms, Diogenes that thought it was made of air, Heraclitus considered it a fiery “exhalation” (ἀναθυμίασις), while others took it to be a liquid, e.g. water or blood (404b30-405b10). The author of the Hippocratic treatise De diaeta, probably written during Plato’s lifetime, speaks of the ψυχή as “having a mixture of fire and water, a portion of the human body” (1.7.1). Some two thousand years later, Descartes would admit to a very similar pre-theoretical conception of the soul, as something “like wind or fire or ether, infused throughout my firmer parts” (Meditations on First Philosophy II.5).

5 I here disagree with Barnes 1982, 472-477.
This complex process of development in the philosophical tradition has obscured our understanding of Plato’s doctrine of the immortality of the soul. The Stoics and the Epicureans held, plausibly enough, that psychic corporealism ruled out the possibility of permanent existence for individual souls, as all bodies are composites liable to dissolution and destruction. The later Platonist tradition accordingly saw that establishing the soul’s incorporeality was crucial to proving its immortality. Since the immortality of the soul was a central and distinctive tenet of the their school, the Platonists then read the incorporeality of the soul back into Plato’s own texts. On my reading, while Plato contributed to the development of the Platonist view, he himself did not hold it: unlike the Forms, the soul is not, for Plato, incorporeal, at least in a strict sense. This may be entirely to Plato’s credit, philosophically speaking: the notion of an incorporeal soul is problematic. But it does mean that for Plato the soul’s immortality—at least when understood in a literal sense as the permanent post-mortem survival of the individual soul—rests on a much less firm philosophical foundation than the later Platonists believed.

This chapter will consider the main passages in the Platonic corpus where the nature of the soul is at issue, before turning to some representative texts from the later tradition. It is divided into five sections. I begin by offering a complete reading of the Affinity Argument in the *Phaedo*, showing that it does not in fact rely on the notion of soul as incorporeal. In the second section, I examine the occurrences in the dialogues of the technical term “bodiless” (ἁσώματος)—a word probably coined by Plato—to show that it is never applied to the soul. In the third section, I turn to the account of the construction of soul in the *Timaeus*. While much is obscure in this account, the soul that Timaeus describes has at least many body-like attributes. While it is clearly wrong to say that Plato holds the soul to be incorporeal, his positive view of the soul’s nature does remain somewhat unclear—making it easy for a basic misunderstanding of his position to arise and persist. The fourth section sketches how the idea of the incorporeal soul thus originated in the Old Academy in response to criticisms from

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6My examination of *Laws* X will be glancing. For a full consideration, see Appendix 1.
Aristotle and the early Stoics and Epicureans. In the fifth, I turn to some later Platonist texts (principally Plotinus, *Ennead* IV.7) to show how the soul’s incorporeality became crucial to defenses of its immortality.

### 2.1 The Affinity Argument (*Phaedo* 77d-84b)

Although Socrates mocks Cebes’ worry that the soul could be “scattered” at death as childish (77d-e), the concern is perfectly plausible on the basis of the conception of the soul standard at the time, whereby it is something like “breath or smoke,” as Cebes earlier put it (70a). The Affinity Argument might therefore be reasonably expected to challenge this kind of *de facto* corporeal conception of the soul. Yet Socrates never claims that the soul is bodiless. To see the argument’s true force, a detailed analysis is needed.

As noted above, the Affinity Argument begins with two very sensible questions. First, what sort of things are liable to be scattered or, in general, split up and divided? Second, what sort of thing is our soul? Here is Socrates’ suggested answer to the first question:

> “Doesn’t it belong (προσήκει) to what has been put together and to what is composite by nature (τῷ μὲν συντεθέντι τε καὶ συνθέτῳ ὀντὶ φύσει) to suffer (πάσχειν) this, namely being divided (διαιρεθῆναι) in the way it was put together (ταύτῃ ᾗ ἐπετήθη)? But if something is indeed incomposite (ἀσύνθετον), then to this alone, if to anything else, doesn’t it belong not to suffer these things?” (78c)

Socrates’s wording is confusing, in part because of the vagueness of the term “belongs to” (προσήκει). I take it, however, that he means to endorse two claims: (1) everything composite is able to be scattered, while (2) everything incomposite is immune to being divided or scattered. I will refer to these two claims together as the *Simplicity Principle*. By this principle, a thing cannot be destroyed by division if and only if it is simple, i.e. incomposite. The Principle as I have formulated it here does not rule out the possibility that some

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7Commentators (e.g. [Gallo](1975), 138) have wondered whether by “composite” (ἀσύνθετον) here Socrates means simply “having parts” or rather “having been put together.” I agree with [Burnet](1914), 66 ad 78c1 that in the phrase τῷ μὲν συντεθέντι τε καὶ συνθέτῳ ὀντὶ φύσει we must take φύσει with ὀντὶ (rather than with the following προσήκει). Read in this way, the point of the phrase seems to be to explicitly embrace both what has been put together or assembled and what naturally has parts. The distinction (despite the later aorist passive in ταύτῃ ἐπετήσω) is thus apparently not supposed to be relevant to the argument.
composite things might never actually be divided as a matter of contingent fact; it merely
states that all composite things are potentially divisible. As I discuss below (§ 2.3), Plato’s
Timaeus appears to countenance (unlike Aristotle) the possibility that something could be
created and composite, and thus in principle destructible, yet in fact endure forever.

The Simplicity Principle is of great importance in the later philosophical tradition. Plato’s
text is the ultimate inspiration for what Kant calls the “customary argument” whereby the
soul is indestructible because it is a “simple being.” This, however, is a misunderstanding
of the actual role played by the Simplicity Principle in the Affinity Argument. Although
Socrates’ opening questions awaken the expectation that he will give a characterization of
the soul’s own nature in terms of its liability to being scattered, the argument that he pro-
vides does this at most very indirectly. In contrast to later exponents of the “customary
argument,” Socrates in the Phaedo never claims that the soul is incomposite. He is thus
not anticipating the argument that Kant criticizes. (There is therefore no immediate conflict
between the Affinity Argument in the Phaedo and the tripartite model of the soul found in
the Republic and other dialogues.)

Socrates also does not make any explicit connection here between divisibility and corpo-
reality: the concept of “body” is absent from his elaboration of the Simplicity Principle. The
distinction between composite and incomposite should not be taken as just a roundabout
way of getting at the difference between corporeals and incorporeals. The notion of an in-

\[8\] Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* B413, here criticizing Moses Mendelssohn: “Dieser scharfsinnige
Philosoph merkte bald in dem gewöhnlichen Argumente, dadurch bewiesen werden soll, daß die Seele (wenn
man einräumt, sie sei ein einfaches Wesen) nicht durch Zerteilung zu sein aufhören könne, einen Mangel
der Zulänglichkeit zu der Absicht, ihr die notwendige Fortdauer zu sichern, indem man noch ein Aufhören
ihres Daseins durch Verschwinden annehmen könnte.” Mendelssohn argued that a simple soul could not just
vanish, but Kant counters that it could perish in yet another way, namely through a gradual loss of its
powers (B414). In the first edition of the first *Critique*, Kant also argues in greater detail against the view
that the simplicity of the soul as a metaphysical fact can be derived from the unity of the perceiving subject
(A351-361).

\[9\] Here I agree with Rowe 1993, 189. What I take to be the most common interpretation of the Affinity
Argument is given by Bett 1986, 17: “in the Phaedo the soul is argued to be akin to the Forms—that is, to
the objects granted to belong to the non-composite, changeless, intelligible class; and from this it is deduced
that the soul, too, is non-composite and changeless, and therefore immortal (78b4ff.). Or at least, it is
claimed, the soul in its essential nature is non-composite and changeless. However, because of its association
with the body, it is bound, in this life, to partake of the changeable to some extent—though this taint is
something we should strive to minimize.”

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composite body was defended in Plato’s day by the atomists, who seem to have held that (at least some) atoms were corporeal yet indivisible. There also seem to be things that are incorporeal yet composite: sentences, ratios, mathematical proofs, etc., all have parts but are not bodily. So the distinctions between what is composite and incomposite and what is corporeal and incorporeal do not necessarily coincide.

At the very least, then, Socrates’ choice of terms allows him to avoid taking a direct stand on whether the soul is bodily. More likely, however, is that he simply intends to put forward the Simplicity Principle as applying only to bodily things. The Principle, after all, is not obviously appealing when applied to non-bodily composites: can mathematical proofs be scattered? Socrates does not explicitly express this limitation on the Principle’s scope because he does not need to: he remains within the frame of the corporealist ontology implied by Cebe’s initial worry. This explains why, in his statement of the second half of the Principle (78c3-4), Socrates seems slightly hesitant about whether there actually are any incomposite things (ei dè to turgxanei ou anaswntov) and even glancingly raises the possibility that nothing is actually indivisible (ei'pep to ou alalw). These are exactly the doubts that one would expect from a corporealist who was at the same time not an atomist. On this reading, far from challenging the corporealist conception of the soul, Socrates in fact presupposes it.

We can now proceed to the argument proper. The first stage runs:

[1] The Simplicity Principle: all incomposite things are indissoluble, while all composite things are dissoluble (78c1-4).
[2] It is “most likely” (mu'lasta eikos) that unchanging things are incomposite, while things that change are composite (78c6-8).
[3] The Forms are unchanging (78c10-d9).
[4] Particular things are always changing (78d10-e6).

Aristotle attributes to Democritus an argument to the effect that no body or magnitude can be “divisible through and through” (panty diamectov, De generatione et corruptione 316a14-b-35). It is admittedly not clear whether Democritus or other atomists saw atoms as indivisible in principle or merely in practice, but the term atomo (“uncuttable”) suggests that, at a minimum, they held the latter to be true. Plato was surely aware of the atomists, although he notoriously does not mention them.

Cf. Socrates’ “dream” in the Theaetetus, where he claims that a logos is an “interweaving of names” (onomatov...symplow, 202b4-5). Clearly Socrates is thinking of this “interweaving” as a kind of syntheios (cf. synkeimena, 202b3; anaswntov, 205c7).
[5] Particular things are perceived by the senses, while the Forms are invisible and grasped only by reasoning (79a1-4).

[6] There are two “classes of beings” (ἐἴδη τῶν ὄντων): one visible and never in the same condition, one invisible and unvarying (79a6-11). This sums up [3]-[5].

In [3] Socrates introduces a group of entities extremely important to the argument, which I for convenience will call the Forms, although the usual technical terms ἐἶδος and ἰδέα are not used here in that sense. He speaks instead of “the being on its own (αὐτῆς ἡ οὐσία), that we give an account of, with respect to what it is, through questions and answers,” and offers as examples “the equal on its own” (αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον) and “the beautiful on its own” (αὐτὸ τὸ καλὸν).

This “being on its own” that is the object of Socrates’ dialectical investigations has been mentioned in the Phaedo before (cf. 65d-e, 76d-77a, and, for further discussion, §5.2). Here the important point is that the Forms are “always invariably in the same condition” (ὡσαύτως ἀεὶ ἔχει κατὰ ταὐτά), never admitting “change” (μεταβολήν) or “alteration” (ἀλλοίωσιν), such that each is “uniform” (μονοειδῆς), i.e. only ever having one character.¹²

In [4], Socrates contrasts the Forms to particulars: “the many beautiful things, like human beings or horses or cloaks or any other such things, or the equal things, and other such things that share the names of those [Forms].” With regard to these particulars, Socrates seems to embrace a version of the Heraclitean theory of flux: they are “never, so to speak, in the same condition at all either in relation to themselves or to each other.”¹³ Interestingly, Socrates does not explicitly draw the conclusion at this point that Forms are incomposite or indissoluble or that particulars are composite and dissoluble. In fact, after [2] the terms “composite” (σύνθετος) and “incomposite” (ἀσύνθετος) do not appear again in the argument.

¹² The word μονοειδής can mean “having only one part” rather than many, thus being a synonym for “incomposite” (cf. Theaeetetus 205d1). But it can also mean “having one look or character,” i.e. never changing its “appearance” in time (cf. Symposium 211b-e, Timaeus 59b). The context here suggests that the latter meaning (basically a synonym for “invariable”) is in play.

¹³ The Greek text reads: οὔτε αὐτὰ αὐτοῖς οὔτε ἀλλήλοις αὐθέντες ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν οὐδαμῶς κατὰ ταὐτά (78c3-4). As Rowe 1993, 184 hints, ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν may apologize for (and thus perhaps implicitly weaken) the sweeping, undefended statement. The juxtaposition of αὐτοῖς and ἀλλήλοις seems intended to embrace both what Irwin 1977 calls “self-change” and “aspect-change.” I thus see no reason to follow Apolloni 1996, 16 in insisting, very counter-intuitively, that Socrates cannot have “change in our sense of qualitative alteration or local motion” in mind when drawing his contrast between Forms and particulars here.
proper; liability to being dissolved or scattered only comes up again in the argument’s conclusion at 80b.

Socrates in [5] instead adds a further point of contrast between the two groups: the many things in the second group can be perceived through the senses, while the Forms are invisible and are grasped only by “reasoning in thought,” as Socrates has already emphasized earlier (65d-e). In [6], he then sums up these correlations by positing “two types of beings (δύο εἴδη τῶν ὄντων), one visible, one unseen” (79a). He then applies this division to the human body and soul (both terms appear here in the argument for the first time):

[7] The human body (“our body”) is “more similar and more related” (ὁμοιότερον καὶ συγγενέστερον) to the visible class (79b4-6).

[8] The soul is invisible, at least “with respect to human nature” (79b7-15).

[9] The soul is “more similar than the body to the invisible class” (79b16-17).

Surprisingly, rather than simply assigning body and soul to the two types of beings, in [7] and [8] Socrates gets Cebes to agree merely that the human body is “more similar and more related” to the visible type and (with even weaker wording) that the soul is “more similar than the body” to the invisible. (Socrates does not say that members of the visible class are in general “bodies” or that members of the invisible class are not.)

As evidence for his claims, Socrates appeals to the fact that body and soul are obviously themselves visible and invisible, respectively. In the case of the body, this is not controversial, but in the case of the soul, Cebes resists slightly, agreeing at first only that the soul is not visible to human beings (79b). This would be an appropriate reservation for someone who thinks that the soul is a very fine or gaseous substance. Socrates responds, and Cebes accepts, that “visible” and “invisible” are to be taken “with respect to the nature of human beings.” In other words, the soul need not be invisible in principle: as long as it is made of a stuff too fine for our eyes to perceive, it counts as invisible. Now no pre-Socratic corporealists would have disagreed that the psukhe is invisible to human sight. So if Socrates is really

14 Bostock 1986, 118-119 sees the true significance of this exchange, while Rowe 1993, 185 says that “ἄνθρωποι are here probably being contrasted not so much with gods as with disembodied souls.” In fact neither of these possibilities is relevant here.
concerned to claim, against the implicit consensus of his contemporaries, that the soul is incorporeal in a strict sense, he certainly misses an opportunity here to insist that the soul is not merely practically but *in principle* not the sort of thing that can be seen.

There is an important lack of parallelism between Socrates’ claims of similarity as regards body and soul. The body clearly would seem to be a *full member* of the visible class (“human beings” were even cited as examples of sensible particulars at 78d). The wording of Socrates’ claim should accordingly not be read in a way that rules this out: here similarity in the strongest possible sense is at issue. This awakens the expectation that the soul will likewise be similar to the invisible class in such a strong sense, i.e. be a full member of the class. But it seems unlikely that this could be the case: could the thing responsible for cognition, emotions, and indeed life itself (as Socrates maintains in the *Phaedo*) really possess all the characteristics attributed to the Forms, like excluding all change and alteration? Here a much weaker kind of similarity must be at issue. It seems, in other words, that Socrates equivocates here in his use of “similar,” but for rhetorical reasons does not call attention to this. If in truth the soul cannot have full membership in either class, then the “two types of beings” do not form an exhaustive classification: soul is somehow in between, possessing a problematic, indeed unique ontological status.

Socrates now offers two further sub-arguments in favor of the similarity of the soul to the invisible class:

[10] When the soul uses the body to examine something with the senses, it “wanders and is troubled and is dizzy as if drunk, since it is grasping things of this sort” (79c2-9).

[11] When the soul on its own contemplates the Forms, it “stops its wandering,” because it is “related” to them. (79d1-7).

[12] The soul is “more similar and more related” to “what is always in the same condition than to what is not” (79d10-e6). From [10] and [11].

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15 For this sort of movement from the claim that A is B to the apparently weaker claim that A is like B, cf. *Republic* 349d, where Socrates suggests that if the unjust man is prudent and good, then he must be like (ἐοικε) the prudent and good man. Thrasymachus responds, sensibly: “How will someone of this sort (ὁ τοιοῦτος ὢν) not also be like (ἐοικέναι) people of this sort?” In this argument the relationship denoted by the verb ἐοικε is equivalent to being ἄμοια (cf. 350c).

16 Here I agree with [Frede 1999], 67.
[13] “Nature commands” the soul to rule the body and for the body to be ruled by the soul (79e9-80a2).

[14] The divine (τὸ θεῖον) is by nature such as to rule, while the mortal (τὸ θνητόν) is such as to be ruled (80a2-5).

[15] The soul is like (ἔοικεν) the divine (80a7-9). From [12] and [13].

Socrates’ second consideration in favor of the similarity of the soul to the invisible class ([10]-[12]) is the most complex and suggestive—the heart of the Affinity Argument. When the soul examines objects through the senses, it becomes confused and liable to error because of the sort of things it is in contact with ([10]). Perceptible things themselves “wander,” on Socrates’ view, since they are in flux. But when the soul on its own contemplates the unchanging Forms, it “goes off there to what is pure and always being and immortally and unvarying,” to which is it “related,” and “stops its wandering and in relation to them is always unvaryingly constant, since it is grasping things of this sort” ([11]).

The argument seems to amount to the following. Body and soul each alone have direct access to the sensible and intelligible worlds, respectively. To find out about sensibles, the soul must “use” the body (προσχρήται, 72c2), while it can examine intelligibles “on its own by itself” (αὐτῇ καὶ ἀὑτῇ, 79d1). Moreover, the soul’s cognition of intelligibles is associated by Socrates with better functioning: it is no longer “troubled” and “dizzy.” On these two grounds, Socrates can claim that the soul is in some sense “related” (συγγενής) to the Forms, which is what he needs for his conclusion in [12] that the soul is “more related” (than the body is) to the Forms. On this reading, the “relationship” (συγγένεια) is simply one of direct and clear cognitive access.

But Socrates also suggests that the soul is in some sense “similar” to or “like” (ὁμοιος) the Forms (at least to a greater degree than the body is). Gallop accordingly suggests that the

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17 This is the first time that the Forms have been called ἀθάνατον, which seems, however, warranted given that they are immutable.

18 I here follow Lorenz 2009 against Bostock 1986, 118-199.

19 On the history of the term συγγένεια see Des Places 1964, who shows how it is rooted in notions of biological kinship. But his treatment of the Affinity Argument (pp. 71-73) is not very helpful. The important point for my purposes is that συγγένεια as a relationship or kinship need not imply that the two things involved are made of the same substance. I take it that the latter is the implication of the adjective ὁμοφυής, used later by Simmias alongside συγγενής (τοῦ θείου τε καὶ ἀθανάτου ὁμοφυή τε καὶ συγγενής, 86b1-2).
Empedoclean principle of “like-knows-like” is tacitly assumed. This principle holds that for one thing to know another, the two things must have at least some shared characteristics or constituents (though they need not be similar in all ways). The privileged cognitive relationship would thus be grounded on a deeper similarity. According to Aristotle, Plato relies on this idea of “like-knows-like” to explain cognition in the *Timaeus*, but neither there nor here in the *Phaedo* is there any direct textual evidence for it.

For Gerson, Plato relies on the Empedoclean principle to show that the soul must be an “immaterial entity,” since it can know immaterial entities, i.e. the Forms. But this strong conclusion is both unwarranted by the text and implausible in itself. The anachronistic character of Gerson’s approach is first of all betrayed by the fact that nothing in the Affinity Argument, including the Forms, is ever said to be incorporeal, let alone “immaterial” (*ἄναλος* is a post-Aristotelian term). And as I have already said, it seems impossible for the soul to be on the same ontological level as the Forms or to possess all of their qualities: the soul can hardly be called immutable, for instance, given that it is liable both to be in contact with *either* sensibles or intelligibles and that, in the latter case, it wanders and is confused. Admittedly Socrates claims that when the soul contemplates the Forms it “stops its wandering and in relation to them is always unvaryingly constant,” but here the qualification “in relation to them” (*περὶ ἑκεῖνα*, where ἑκεῖνα refers to the Forms) is important: Socrates is not claiming that when the soul contemplates the Forms it becomes *entirely* constant and unvarying.

If we reject the idea that “like-knows-like” is in play here, we need a different way of understanding the “similarity” between the soul and the Forms, which does not imply a shared ontological status. Such a sense of ὅμοιος is found in a famous passage of the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates posits as a goal of the philosopher “becoming similar to god as much as possible” (*ὁμοίῳσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δύνατον*), adding that this “becoming similar” amounts to

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21 Cf. *De anima* 404b16-18. A related principle is mentioned (but not endorsed) by Plato’s Socrates in the *Lysis* (214a-b), where he attributes it to “the writings of the extremely wise,” namely that like is always friendly or well-disposed to like (*τὸ ὅμοιον τῷ ὅμοιῷ ἀνάγκη ἅπας φίλον εἶναι*).
“becoming just and pious with intelligence” (176a-b). The context in the Theaetetus is complex and cannot be discussed here, but three points are worth noting. (1) Similarity to the divine is presented as a goal, i.e. the result of a process of assimilation, rather than as an intrinsic feature of human beings. (2) This similarity is not ever total; it can only be realized to the extent possible. (3) The process of ὀμοίωσις consists in cultivating certain moral and intellectual qualities proper to the soul. If we read the Affinity Argument closely together with this passage, we can see how “similar” and “related” could be synonyms, as Socrates in the Phaedo in fact appears to use them: both terms imply the potential (which is not always realized) for a privileged connection that is not, however, based on shared essential characteristics.

The third sub-argument offered by Socrates ([13]-[15]) is less impressive. Here Socrates aligns the soul with the divine (τὸ θεῖον) and the body with the mortal (τὸ θνητόν). This terminology has not been used so far in the argument, but presumably what is divine is here assumed to be also immortal. Possibly we are not supposed to take the divine as aligned with the Forms and the invisible class of beings, but rather to see this as a new independent line of thought. At any rate, Plato does elsewhere connect the soul’s natural right to rule the body to its ontological priority (cf. Timaeus 34b-c and Laws X, 896b-c), but the natural hierarchy is not always realized (cf. Timaeus 42e-44c). In the Phaedo, the tension seems acute, given Socrates’ emphasis on how the body imprisons and harasses the soul—to the extent that separation, rather than orderly coexistence, becomes the appropriate goal for philosophers.

Socrates now summarizes the upshot of his three considerations and draws his conclusions:

23 Apolloni 1996, 28 defends this part of Socrates’ argument, claiming that Plato is appealing to the soul’s status as “the ultimate source of free human action.” The idea is intriguing, despite anachronistic terminology, but entirely unsupported by the text: Socrates’ words suggest an appeal to a natural normative hierarchy, not to any intrinsic feature of the soul.

24 Gallop 1975, 140 observes that nature’s command refers to “what ought to happen, not what usually does,” but that nonetheless “the notion of the soul’s ‘rulership’ sits awkwardly with the theme of its imprisonment within the body.”
[16] The soul is “extremely similar (ὁμοιότατον) to what is divine and immortal and intelligible and uniform and indissoluble and always unvaryingly constant to itself” (80b1-3). This sums up [9], [12], and [15].

[17] The body is “extremely similar to what is human and mortal and unintelligible and multiform and dissoluble and never in the same condition as itself” (80b3-5).

[18] “It belongs to the body to be swiftly dissolved (τάχυ διαλύεσθαι), but for the soul, on the other hand, to be entirely indissoluble (τὸ παράπαν ἀδιαλύτῳ), or close to it” (79b9-c1). From [16] and [17].

[19] The body in fact “remains for a fairly long time,” especially if the deceased is young or the corpse embalmed; certain parts, like bones, almost never decay (80c2-d4).

[20] It is not the case that the soul will be immediately blown away and destroyed after death (80d8-e1). From [18] and [19].

This final phase of the argument has two movements. First, in [16]-[18], Socrates makes an analogical argument. On the most basic level, an analogical argument—or, in Aristotle’s terms, an argument “through similarity” (διὰ τῆς ὁμοιότητος, cf. *Topics* 108a7-17, 156b10-17)—claims that because two things are similar in one or more respects, they are similar in some other respect as well. Such arguments are a dialectical tactic related, as Aristotle says, to induction. As such they are at best persuasive rather than probative; simple analogies can easily be false or misleading. In this case, the analogy even as such is also vitiated by the equivocation in the sense of “similar.”

The qualifications attached to the conclusion that Socrates draws at this point—it “belongs” (προσήκει) to the soul to be entirely dissoluble “or close to it” (ἡ ἐγγύς τι τούτου)—is a covert admission of these problems. He moreover does not simply end the argument here. The weak conclusion in [18] is then used as a premise, along with [19], for a simple argument a fortiori: the body outlasts death, so the soul, with its loftier qualities, ought to last even longer.

This line of thought does not depend on the Simplicity Principle. As I have already pointed out, Socrates has nowhere committed himself to the idea that the soul is incomposite, and he left the crucial link between incompositeness and immutability undefended (78c). In the catalogue of attributes of the intelligible world (80b), the connection to the Simplicity

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25 Here the non-equivalence of “uniform” (μονοειδές) and “incomposite” (ἀσύνθετον), discussed above in Note 12, becomes important. Gerson 2003, 79-81 conflates the two. Socrates is not saying that the soul is very similar to what is incomposite.

26 A similar line of thought is adumbrated in the *Gorgias* (524b-d); see § 4.3.
Principle is even obscured by the replacement of “incomposite” (ἀσύνθετος) with “indissoluble” (ἀδιάλυτος), which appears alongside “divine” and “immortal.” What matters, then, is primarily just the soul’s higher status, compared to the body, due to its closer relationship with the Forms.

This argument is obviously far from proving the soul to be immortal. The ancient Platonist commentators generally took the Affinity Argument to prove the soul to be longer-lasting than the body, but not immortal in a strict sense (cf. § 2.5). This is indeed what Socrates at this point seems to present the argument as establishing: it is not the case, he ultimately concludes, that the soul, “being such a thing and naturally so constituted, once released from the body will be immediately (εὐθύς) blown away and destroyed, as most people say” (80d-e). But even this limited conclusion does not really follow. The problem, of which Plato is in fact aware (Simmias will later point it out), is that a thing’s relationship to the divine or the intelligible does not necessarily have implications regarding its liability to destruction or decay. A cathedral might be much more related to the divine than an underground bunker, but it is also much more easily destroyed.

With the argument proper complete, Socrates now shifts into an exhortation to the purification of the soul from bodily concerns (80e-84b). This passage returns to many of the themes and motifs of his earlier so-called “Defense” (63e-69e, cf. § 5.2), but also introduces some important new variations, most notably the contrast between the blessed postmortem existence of philosophical souls in the company of the gods and the pitiable fate of souls that have been overly attached to the cares of the body. The latter, Socrates says, are “weighty and heavy and earthy and visible,” and after death must continue to wander around on earth, near tombs, as ghosts (81c-d). The souls’ wanderings are concluded only when they

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27Cf. Olympiodorus, In Phaedonem 13.4: “This argument shows, on the basis of similarity, that the soul exists after [death], being more indissoluble, and continues to exist, being longer-lasting (πολυχρονιωτέρα), but not that it is immortal.” Similarly Damascius, In Phaedonem I 311: “the substance of the soul is longer-lasting than the body, given that it is more similar to the immortal things... Perhaps the soul is left behind and exists by itself but is nonetheless exhausted after a long time, as the conclusion of the argument makes clear and as Cebes later suggests.”
are reincarnated as animals suited to their dispositions; the very best of the non-philosophical 
become bees, wasps, ants, or, perhaps, human beings again (81d-82b).

Gallop worries that in this talk of non-philosophical souls becoming earthy and visible 
“an incorporeal thing” (the soul) is spoken of with language that “taken literally, describes 
interaction between one material substance and another.” An advantage of my reading of 
the preceding argument, whereby Socrates is in fact presupposing a corporealist view of the 
soul, is that there is no obstacle to taking this language quite literally. There are parallels 
for the notion of changes in the constitution of a corporeal soul: a fragment of Heraclitus, 
for instance, suggests that a drunk person’s thought is impaired because her soul has gotten 
wet (fr. 117 Diels-Kranz). Perhaps what Socrates has in mind is that souls (which, in their 
best condition, are made of an extremely rarified substance like air or fire) can accumulate 
excess particles of earth in them, making them literally visible and weighty. This could occur 
when the soul is literally too closely entangled with the solid (earthen) body.

Still, it is also possible, and I think preferable, to take Socrates’ description of the afterlife 
metaphorically, as an allegory for human lives in the here and now. (On my reading of 
the Affinity Argument as not involving the incorporeality of the soul, the metaphor of an 
“earthy soul” is in no way misleading.) Socrates’ main purpose in this section would be 
simply to render vivid a contrast between the blessedness of the philosophical life and the 
wretchedness of ordinary lives. If we thus take what is said about the afterlife as a metaphor 
for lived human experience, then the force of this contrast does not in fact depend on any 
literal postmortem existence (which the Affinity Argument would not suffice to establish).

The non-philosophers said to be reincarnated as animals in fact live brutish, bestial lives on

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28 Gallop 1975, 143. Robinson 1995, 30-32 sees Plato here as perhaps unconsciously influenced by a view 
of soul as something like “ectoplasm.”
29 So Dorter 1982, 79-82. Gallop 1975, 144 says that the theme of reincarnation is “developed here with 
savage irony.” More nuanced is Frede 1999, 72: “Es wäre natürlich vermesen, Platons Äußerungen über 
die Wiedergeburt und Seelenwanderung also reine Allegorie deuten zu wollen. Sicher dient diese Parabel 
von den Tiermetamorphosen hier aber in erster Linie einer Bewertung der jeweiligen Lebensform, nicht der 
Prophezeihung über die Zukunft.” It seems to me at any rate of dubious charity to make Plato appeal in 
earnest to the existence of ghosts, and Cebes’ reaction here is tellingly doubtful: Ἐικός γε, ὃς Σώκρατες 
(81d5).
earth, while philosophers enjoy a life that is immortal in the sense of being blessed and fit for the gods, rather than actually temporally everlasting.\footnote{develop this non-literal understanding of the term \textit{ἀθάνατος} at greater length in Chapter 2.}

A different interpretation of the Affinity Argument and the following exhortation has been offered by Woolf\footnote{Woolf 2004, 113-118.}. On his view, the soul can take on the basic characteristics of either of the two classes of beings, depending on the kind of life that it leads. If the soul assimilates itself to the invisible class, it is incorporeal and in composite and enjoys a blessed and everlasting life. If, however, the soul associates with body and thus becomes earthy and visible, its postmortem existence will not only be pitiable but in fact may not be everlasting, since the soul will be bodily and thus composite and subject to destruction, according to the Simplicity Principle. In this way, whether the soul is immortal in fact depends on the kind of life a person lives. The Affinity Argument is thus seriously intended to establish the soul’s immortality—but only of an earned, conditional sort.

Woolf’s proposal goes beyond Plato’s text in several ways. The notion of conditional immortality, first of all, is never even hinted at. That \textit{all} souls survive death seems to be simply assumed in Socrates’ exhortation; what is at stake is merely the quality of postmortem existence. Second, Woolf’s proposal involves the problematic notion that it is possible for the soul to switch back and forth between having the status of an incorporeal form and that of a corporeal thing. It is one thing to claim that the soul, originally a fine, gaseous substance, becomes “earthy” by having other kinds of particles mixed in; it is quite another to say that something like a Form becomes “earthy.” Even if this kind of transformation could be made sense of, the notion that the soul is ever incorporeal is simply not suggested by the text.
Nor, again, is a literal reading of the soul’s becoming bodily necessary. For these reasons, Woolf’s reading seems impossible.

Let me sum up my own view. The Affinity Argument is not a rigorous proof of the soul’s immortality. Socrates, with his cautiously worded conclusion, does not attempt to pass it off as such, and Plato will shortly use the objection of Simmias to criticize the argument’s basic logic. In fact the argument even casts doubt on the possibility of the soul’s being immortal sensu stricto, given that it is not a member of the same ontological class as the Forms. The stress laid on the soul’s kinship with the divine and the a fortiori argument for its survival are not logically probative, but serve a twofold rhetorical purpose. Socrates is first of all complying with Cebes’ request to that he persuade “the child in us” not to fear death (77e). Second, he is invoking the notion of an afterlife, probably metaphorically, as part of a further exhortation to the ideal of the philosophical life.

It is not the case, however, that the argument is merely a rhetorical exercise. Like the Recollection Argument earlier in the Phaedo, the Affinity Argument is an important statement about epistemology and metaphysics, one of the first places where Plato sets out his distinction between the sensory world and the intelligible realm. The soul has access

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32 Admittedly, at 83d4-5, pleasure and pain are said to “nail and fasten the soul to the body and make it body-like” (ποιεῖ σωματοειδῆ). The term σωματοειδής is an apparent Platonic coinage that sometimes clearly does mean “bodily, corporeal” (cf. e.g. Phaedo 86a2, Timaeus 31b4). But its use here need not mean that the soul becomes corporeal, having been incorporeal before. On a literal reading of the passage, the (corporeal) soul is made body-like by having earth (the element characteristic of the human body) mixed into it. On a metaphorical reading, what Socrates means is that pleasure and pain fascinate the soul and limit its cognitive horizons to the sensory world of the body. Similarly, at 81c5 the soul is said to be διειλημμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ σωματοειδοῦ, which Burnet 1911, 73 ad loc. renders as “broken up by,’ ‘patched up with’ the corporeal,” citing the occurrence of the same participle at Phaedo 110b7, where this is clearly the sense; cf. similarly Laws 886a4. But διειλημμένη can equally well mean “seized” or “grasped,” as in wrestling, which would make this passage metaphorical as well: it is classified under this meaning by the LSJ, s.v. διαλαμβάνω.

33 In this general assessment I agree with Frede 1999, 73: “ein Beweis im eigentlichen Sinn ist gar nicht Platons Absicht, wie die Betonung der bloßen Verwandtschaft mit dem Unveränderlichen und Intelligiblen zeigt.” Contrast the verdict of Elton 1997, who sees the Affinity Argument as a deliberate example of how not to do philosophy.

34 Dorter 1982, 76 is right to say that the argument “may be the most persuasive” in the Phaedo, even though nothing is “rigorous demonstrated.” In agreeing that the argument is persuasive, I do not mean that I myself find it persuasive. I agree only that the argument is well calculated to appeal to certain entrenched psychological biases. Dorter’s comparison to the argument from design for the existence of God – another bad but appealing argument – seems apt.

35 Frede 1999, 73 remarks rightly that, in contrast to the earlier Defense, Socrates is now not so much arguing that death should not be feared as issuing a warning not to live in the wrong way.
to both of these realms, but is more properly “related” to the latter. Although the nature of this relationship is left vague in the *Phaedo*, it need not imply that the soul is either in composite or incorporeal. In short, contrary to the expectations awakened by his initial question, Socrates does not say much at all about the soul’s nature in the Affinity Argument. The text throughout is perfectly compatible with Cebes’ assumption that the soul is some kind of subtle or gaseous body.

This conclusion is in fact virtually demanded by earlier parts of the *Phaedo*. Socrates has been speaking of philosophical purification as causing the soul “to be separate (χωριζεῖν) as much as possible from the body and accustomed to be gathered and collected (συναγείρεσθαι τε καὶ ἁθροίζεσθαι) entirely on its own by itself” (67c). Death, moreover, is the “release and separation (λύσις καὶ χωρισμός) of the soul from the body” (67d). Cebes’s worry, then, is that the soul will be “scattered” rather than “gathered” once “separated.” It is in fact quite hard to make sense of this language of gathering and separating if the soul is an incorporeal thing.36

This was certainly later noticed by the Stoics. Nemesius (De natura hominis II.22) preserves the following argument attributed to Chrysippus: “Death is the separation (χωρισμός) of soul from body. But nothing bodiless (ἀσώματον) is separated from body. Nor can a bodiless thing be in contact with (ἐφάπτεται) body. But the soul is in contact with and is separated from the body. So the soul is not bodiless.” Chrysippus here takes the definition of death from the *Phaedo* as a premise in arguing that the soul is in fact corporeal. On the basis of the Affinity Argument, at least, we have no reason to think that Plato himself would have disputed this line of thought.

### 2.2 Plato’s use of the term *asomatos*

One point about the Affinity Argument is indisputable, if widely ignored: Socrates there never actually says that anything (not the soul, not even the Forms) is bodiless or incorporeal. This fact might invite the following line of thought. The Greek word for “body” (*soma*) was

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36 Loraux 1989, 196 seems to see an inconsistency as resulting: “pour décrire l’âme engagée dans le processus de séparation, c’est au vocabulaire du corps que recourt l’écrivain Platon.”
originally used to refer to the human body, including especially the corpse after death. The *Phaedo*, including the Affinity Argument, is filled with talk of the soul existing without or separately from the body in this sense (i.e. χωρὶς τοῦ σώματος), whereby the soul is “disembodied” without being “bodiless” in terms of its own constitution. This sense of soma—designating, broadly speaking, the part of a living thing that is not the soul—must be distinguished from another sense, whereby it designates a general ontological constituent of things, such that even non-living things like rocks or books can be said to have or be bodies. From this it is another step to conceive of the idea of a thing that is entirely without soma in this sense, i.e. incorporeal. Is it possible, then, that Plato, at least when he wrote the *Phaedo*, simply did not have the conceptual framework or vocabulary to describe the soul as incorporeal in a strict sense at all? If this is the case, then the Affinity Argument might be better interpreted as groping inarticulately towards such an idea, rather than deliberately rejecting it or holding it at arm’s length. The purpose of this section is to show, first, that Plato does—in apparent contrast to his predecessors—have a robust notion of incorporeality and, second, that he nowhere (either in the *Phaedo* or elsewhere) describes the soul in such terms—a silence that must be taken as meaningful.

The ontological use of soma for stuffs and non-living entities was, first of all, surely established prior to Plato’s time; in the late fifth century BCE Diogenes of Apollonia already explicitly identified air, which he held to be the basic constituent of all things, as a soma.38 There is by contrast no evidence for a pre-Platonic notion of incorporeality.39 The only possible exception comes in a fragment of the monist Melissus, active in the fifth century

37 Cf. Snell 1975 and, for a more nuanced account of the emergence of the idea of the human body, Holmes 2010, esp. 29-37.
38 Fr. 7 Diels-Kranz. Cf. further Renehan 1980, 118-119.
39 Gomperz 1932 argues that the idea of incorporeal being was first developed prior to Plato in Pythagorean circles, but he relies on faulty inferences and unreliable evidence, as shown by Renehan 1980, 119-125. Gomperz for example infers from the dramatic date of Plato’s *Sophist* in 399 BCE that the supporters of the ἀσώματα εἴδη discussed by the Eleatic Stranger must be primarily (“zunächst”) figures from the late 5th century. On the late testimonium that Gomperz cites from Claudianus Mamertus (*De statu animae* II.7), to the effect that Philolaus held the soul to be an incorporalis convenientia, see now Huffman 1993, 410-414, who agrees with Renehan’s verdict, namely that it reflects the influence of the *Phaedo*. Note also that Aristotle’s criticism of the Pythagoreans at *Metaphysics* A 989b29-990a32 seems to suggest that the Pythagoreans do not have a clear distinction between bodily and bodiless things.
BCE, who writes that what exists, “being one, must not have *soma*” (fr. 9 Diels-Kranz). The late Platonist Simplicius cites these words as evidence that Melissus thinks that reality is incorporeal (*In Physica* IX.110). But Melissus elsewhere claims that what exists must be “infinite in magnitude” (*τὸ μέγεθος ἀπειρον*, fr. 3) and “full” (*πλέων*), where what is full is what “does not give way to or admit [anything else]” (*μὴ τε χωρεῖ μὴ τε εἰσδέχεται*, fr. 7). It thus seems likely that when he denies that what exists has *soma* he is using the term in its older, narrower sense, to denote the body of living things, such that his claim is to be understood as a protest against conceiving of reality as anthropomorphic or vulnerable to forces like disease, rather than as introducing the notion of an incorporeal substance.

Given this situation, it is unsurprising that the technical term *ἀσώματος* (“incorporeal,” “bodiless”) does not occur in extant Greek texts prior to Plato. In Plato’s dialogues, however, this word occurs no less than five times: once (and only once) in the *Phaedo*, in the objection of Simmias, which follows directly upon the Affinity Argument; twice in the *Sophist*; and once each in the *Statesman* and the *Philebus*. Of these passages, the objection of Simmias is the most complex. In the rest of this section, I will first consider this text from the *Phaedo* in some detail. I will then turn briefly to the other four occurrences of the term *ἀσώματος* in the Platonic corpus, in order to show that the word is often applied to the Forms, but never to the soul.

In the *Phaedo*, Simmias begins his objection by offering Socrates the example of the *ἁρμονία* (for now I will not translate, but only transliterate this term, as *harmonia*) of a

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40 This is supported by the fact that Melissus is also concerned to deny (in fr. 7) that what exists feels pain or grief; for discussion, cf. Holmes 2010, 101-108. A further twist: in the reconstruction of Fragment 9 given by Diels-Kranz, the denial that what exists has body is followed by the explanation: “If it had thickness (*πάχος*), it would have parts (*μόρια*), and would no longer be one.” But Palmer 2003 convincingly shows that this sentence (which would seem to force an ontological interpretation of *soma* earlier in the fragment) is not really a quotation from Melissus.

41 A purported fragment of Anaximenes, active in the mid-6th century BCE, which claims that “air is close to the bodiless” (*ἐγγύς ἐστιν ὁ ἀὴρ τοῦ ἀσωμάτου*, fr. 3 Diels-Kranz), is clearly not genuine, as anyone of good sense will realize who bothers to examine its source in an obscure Late Antique treatise on alchemy, falsely attributed to the Platonist Olympiodorus, known as the *De arte sacra lapidis philosophorum*. Cf. Renehan 1980, 119-120. Kingsley 1995, 60-61 defends the authenticity of the Theophrastan doxography on the pre-Socratics that the work contains, but the possibility that the work contains some reliable doxographic information does not guarantee that its one, suspiciously solitary verbatim quotation is genuine.

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The tuning, Simmias says, is “invisible and bodiless (ἀσώματον) and a very fine thing, even divine, when it is in the tuned lyre, while the lyre itself and the strings are bodies and body-like (σώματα τε καὶ σωματοειδῆ) and composite and earthy and related (συγγενῆ) to what is mortal” (85e-86a). The example is apparently meant as a direct challenge to the Affinity Argument: on Socrates’ view, Simmias suggests, the tuning ought to survive even the total destruction of the lyre, which is absurd.

While the lyre is said by Simmias to be composite, the tuning is notably not said to be incomposite. Simmias thus seems to understand the Affinity Argument much as I do, such that it does not turn on the Simplicity Principle. Simmias is merely objecting, quite rightly, to the a fortiori argument that the invisible will always outlast the visible. He does, however, give the tuning the epithet “bodiless” alongside “invisible” and “divine.” This, again, is almost certainly the first appearance of the term ἀσώματος in Greek literature; as we have seen, it does not appear in the Affinity Argument at all. Simmias evidently has inferred that Socrates in the Affinity Argument was taking the invisible class of beings, i.e. the Forms, to be incorporeal.

After offering the lyre and its tuning as a counter-example to the Affinity Argument, Simmias then puts forward a positive theory of the soul as a harmonia (86b-86d). “We suppose,” he says, “that the soul is indeed this sort of thing (τοιοῦτόν τι), a blend (κρᾶσιν) and a harmonia, as if our body was held together in tension (ἐντεταμένου καὶ συνεχομένου) by hot and cold and dry and wet and such things” (86b). The soul is therefore dependent on the body for its existence and will perish, “like other tunings,” when the body does. Socrates will argue against this theory of the soul later in the dialogue (92a-95a).

It is crucial to see that Simmias is using the term harmonia in two very different senses in the example of the lyre and in his subsequent theory of soul. These two senses of the term are distinct: in the lyre example, it refers to the gut and tuning, while in the soul theory, it refers to a specific kind of unity. This distinction is significant for understanding Simmias’ arguments and their implications for the Affinity Argument.

42 Some have thought that Simmias is speaking for the Pythagorean school, or some sub-group thereof. It seems more likely to me that he means “people in general,” but the question is not important for present purposes.

43 Gottschalk 1971, 181 notices the conflict. Rowe 1993, 205 argues that there is no incompatibility. Gallop 1975, 148-149 helpfully distinguishes possible views but doubts that Plato has carefully thought through the
word correspond to the two identified by Aristotle in his criticism of the same theory of soul as a *harmonia* in the *De anima*. A *harmonia*, Aristotle there says, “is either a *logos* of things mixed together or a composition” (λόγος τίς ἐστι τῶν μιχθέντων ἢ σύνθεσις, 407b32-33). In other words, the term *harmonia* can denote either the formula according to which various things are combined or the resulting combination itself. Aristotle calls the second meaning, referring to the combination itself, the “most proper” meaning of the word (408a6)\(^4\).

The sense of *harmonia* that is relevant in the example of the lyre must be roughly speaking the first that Aristotle identifies, i.e. some sort of *logos*. Naturally, the *harmonia* of a lyre is not exactly the ratio of different ingredients mixed together: in a musical context, *harmonia* means (among other things) a “tuning,” a way that an instrument can be tuned or strung in order to produce melodious music in a certain mode or key.\(^4\) It was the great discovery of the early Pythagoreans (the school with which Simmias and Cebes are vaguely connected) that musical *harmoniai* can be expressed as series of mathematical ratios representing intervals between notes.\(^4\) If this is what Simmias is referring to, then the Pythagorean reverence for numbers and ratios as the basic structure of reality would explain very well why he calls it “a very fine thing, even divine.” A *harmonia* in this sense, as a sort of *logos*, would be appropriately designated as incorporeal.

Yet it is Aristotle’s second, “most proper” meaning of *harmonia* that is clearly the relevant one in the second part of Simmias’ objection. For in presenting his theory of soul Simmias

\(^4\)Strikingly, Aristotle does not here countenance two interpretations of *harmonia* that have been attractive to modern scholars, whereby it denotes either the state of the combination or some new entity produced by the combination. Cf. the third and fourth senses of *harmonia* identified by Taylor 2008, 74-75. Since these senses of *harmonia* are also not, to my mind, suggested by anything in Plato’s text, I will discount them in my interpretation. One *prima facie* tempting possibility is the view of Gottschalk 1971, 181, who suggests that the divine and beautiful *harmonia* refers to “the musical sounds” that the lyre makes. But the use of the noun to indicate musical sound would be rare, indeed possibly unparalleled in ancient Greek. More importantly, for the lyre to produce music someone must play it, yet the *harmonia* ought to be something that exists just in virtue of the fact that the lyre has been tuned, even if it is just lying around.

\(^4\)Our evidence for ancient Greek music is helpfully collected and translated in Barker 1989; on the multiple, closely related meanings of *harmonia*, see especially vol. 2, pp. 14-17.

\(^4\)Cf. Aristotle, Metaphysics A 985b31-32, who says that the Pythagoreans “saw the qualities (πάθη) and the *logoi* of *harmoniai* in numbers.”
seems to employ *harmonia* interchangeably with “blend” (*κρᾶσιν*, 86b9), calling the soul a “blend of the things in the body” (*κρᾶσιν τῶν ἐν τῷ σώματι*, 86d2-3). A *harmonia* is thus to be understood as an actual combination, in which the elements are “blended with one another in a measured way” (86c2). This is later confirmed by how Socrates restates Simmias’ view of the soul when he prepares to argue against it: “a *harmonia* is a composite thing (*σύνθετον πράγμα*),” he says, “and the soul is a certain *harmonia* composed (*συγκεῖσθαι*) out of the things held in tension in the body” (92a).

The implications of this view of the soul are more radical than Simmias himself seems to acknowledge. For on this picture the soul is in fact *identical* with the living body considered as a correctly organized whole; the soul simply *is* the sum of the bodily parts, as long as they are combined in the correct way.\(^{47}\) If this is all the soul is, then it is obviously mortal: sufficient damage to a living body can bring it about that the body no longer constitutes a soul (that is, kill it). The details (and viability) of this theory, to which Plato is clearly hostile and against which Socrates argues later in the *Phaedo*, need not further concern us.

At any rate, a composite of corporeal things is obviously not bodiless. Since in his initial example of the lyre Simmias describes the *harmonia* as incorporeal, he is clearly using the term *harmonia* in two different senses in the two phases of his objection, without pointing out the shift. His objection thus really has two prongs, which are independent of each other. First, Simmias challenges the *a fortiori* logic that is at the core of the Affinity Argument: the invisible need not outlast the visible. Second, he suggests that the soul is not really a substance separate from the body at all, as Socrates has consistently assumed. On this reading of the objection, Simmias does not necessarily make any reference whatsoever to the notion of an incorporeal soul: the incorporeal *harmonia* in the example of the lyre need only correspond in a loose and general way to the invisible class of beings in the Affinity Argument, i.e. the Forms.

\(^{47}\)Simmias’s theory, on this reading, foreshadows a view likely held by the Peripatetic Dicaearchus in the late fourth century BCE. Ancient authors, like Cicero (cf. *Tusculan Disputations* I.21, 24, 41, 51) sometimes claim that Dicaearchus denied that the soul existed at all. The sources on Dicaearchus are helpfully collected along with analytical essays in Fortenbaugh and Schütrumpf 2001.
It might be objected, however, that even if Simmias never says this explicitly, the reader is nonetheless supposed to take the relationship of the tuning to the lyre as an analogy for the relationship of soul to body in a human being. The soul would then be implicitly identified as a *harmonia* in the sense of a *logos*. Has Simmias thus understood Socrates to hold that the soul itself is also incorporeal? And if so, should we perhaps take his words as an authorially sanctioned clarification of implications left undeveloped in the Affinity Argument itself?

At this point, however, we must stop to consider a surprising fact: if indeed Simmias in offering the example of the lyre has in mind a *harmonia* in the sense of a numerical *logos*, then it is far from clear that he has really offered a successful counter-example to the Affinity Argument. For if the *harmonia* is a *logos* considered as an independent abstract entity, like a number or a mathematical proof, then it need not be ontologically dependent on any body to instantiate it. Take, for instance, a copy of Homer’s *Iliad* or a temple built to instantiate the Golden Ratio. If either of these corporeal objects is destroyed, the ontological status of the *Iliad* or of the Golden Ratio itself has very plausibly not been affected at all. In fact it seems unlikely that there is any way in which abstract entities of this sort can be destroyed.

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48 What would this mean? To say that the soul is simply a ratio or proportion of, say, relative amounts of earth, air, fire, and water, seems like an unpromising theory. Aristotle, in his criticism of the variant of the *harmonia* theory that takes the soul to be a “*logos* of things mixed together,” points out that different stuffs within the body, like bone or flesh, will have different ratios of their components, producing many souls (*De anima* 408a13-21). But this is an uncharitable objection. First of all, as [Young 2007, 181-182](#) points out, Aristotle sometimes refers to the soul on his own view as a *logos*, using the word as a synonym for “form” (*De anima* 412b15-17 and 414a27-28). When we try to conceive of the soul as a numerical *logos*, we should think of an extremely complex system of numbers and numerical relationships: not the tuning of a single lyre, as it were, but rather that of an entire orchestra. Or, to make a looser but perhaps helpful comparison, the soul-*logos* would be like a computer program. A program can be considered as just an extremely complicated text, specifically a long sequence of code or, even more basically, a sequence of binary values. But it can also be implemented or executed (embodied, so to speak) on a computer. For a sketch of the view that the mind is like a computer program, from a modern (and critical) perspective, see [Olson 2007](#), 145-149. Obviously, of course, such a view is not developed at all in the *Phaedo*.

49 The issue of how to define an abstract entity or object is contentious; cf. [Rosen 2012](#). Abstract objects are certainly incorporeal, and so cannot be destroyed by being scattered, smashed, etc. Plausibly, abstract objects can cease to exist if they are mind-dependent, as some abstract objects seem to be (e.g. fictional characters), and the relevant mind or minds cease to exist. But some abstract objects (e.g. the Pythagorean theorem) seem to be mind-independent and thus eternal and indestructible. Note that in referring to the soul as a *logos* I prefer the term “abstract entity” to “universal,” which is used by [Young 2007](#), 96. As [Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 2003](#) point out (from a contemporary perspective), not all abstract entities are universals. Young objects that “if the soul is a *harmonia* and we regard a *harmonia* as something universal, then we are forced to an absurd result: a human being, a plane figure, and a hand of cards could have the same soul.” This does not actually follow if the soul of a human being is a very complicated *logos*, including
There is a small hint in the text that Plato is aware of precisely this implication: Simmias hesitates to say outright that the *harmonia* would be destroyed along with the lyre. Rather, Plato uses multiple anacoluthic constructions to imitate the somewhat rambling progress of the objection:

“But when someone should smash the lyre or cut and split the strings, if someone should assert on the basis of the same argument as you, that it is necessary that that *harmonia* still exist and not be destroyed—for there would be no way for the lyre to still exist, once the strings were broken, or the strings themselves to still exist, being mortal, or for the *harmonia* to be destroyed, such that it was destroyed prior to something mortal when it itself was of the same nature as and related to the divine and the immortal—but he would say it was necessary that the *harmonia* itself still exist somewhere, and for the wood and strings to rot away before the *harmonia* would suffer anything—and Socrates, I think that you too have thought of this, that we suppose that the soul is indeed this sort of thing (*τοιοῦτόν τι*), a mixture and *harmonia*...” (86a-b)

Simmias first offers a disjointed presentation of the Socratic view that he opposes, but then before actually articulating his criticism breaks off to present his own view. The question of whether the *harmonia* can survive the destruction of the material thing that instantiates it is not actually addressed until 86c6-7, where Simmias says (now conflating the two different senses of *harmonia*) that the soul is just like “other harmoniai, in sounds and in all the works of craftsmen.”

That Simmias does not call attention to the apparent indestructability of certain types of abstract entity is unsurprising, since otherwise the first prong of his objection to the Affinity Argument will collapse. Presumably Plato, on the other hand, would welcome this implication in as much as the *harmonia* is intended to be analogous to the Forms, which after all, are ostensibly indestructible abstract entities. I have already alluded to the reasons why Plato would not want to accord this status to the soul. In contemporary philosophical terms, abstract entities are widely agreed to be unchanging and causally inefficacious. But it seems crucial that the soul, at least as Plato conceives of it, be able move, change, develop, and interact causally with the body and the world.

also specifications of “ingredients” (water, air, and so on). Furthermore, if Plato does believe in some form of reincarnation, this consequence might be one that he would welcome.
My goal has not been to defend a fully worked-out reading of this difficult and much-debated passage, or to consider all possible alternative interpretations. I have merely aimed to suggest that Plato in the *Phaedo* has a clear sense of the distinction between corporeality and incorporeality, and that he quite consciously avoids giving serious consideration to the view that the soul is incorporeal. In the rest of this section, I will turn to a brief survey of the four other occurrences of the word ἀσώματος in the Platonic corpus, all in putatively “late” dialogues (certainly later than the *Phaedo*), in order to show that in all these cases the term is also not applied to the soul.

The passage from the *Sophist* is well known. Here the Eleatic Stranger attempts to broker a compromise in an ontological dispute that he compares to the mythical battle between “giants” and “gods.” He contrasts the “giants,” who “assert that only that which offers some contact and touch (προσβολήν καὶ ἐπαφήν τινα) exists, declaring body and being (οὐσίαν) the same,” with those who “by force make intelligible and bodiless forms (νοητὰ...καὶ ἀσώματα εἰδη) true being” (246a-c). When the Stranger questions the “giants” about the existence of soul and the virtues, Theaetetus responds on their behalf that these all exist and that soul “possesses some body” (σῶμα τι κεκτῆσθαι), but hesitates to claim that the virtues are bodies (246e-247c). The Stranger replies that it “suffices if they admit even any small thing among the things that are is bodiless” (ἀσώματον, 247c-d). As for the “friends of the forms,” they hold that “with the body we share through perception in becoming, but with the soul through reasoning we communicate with real being, which is constant and unvarying” (248a). The main point relevant for us is that the incorporeal beings relevant here are Forms (εἴδη). The “giants” are explicitly corporealists about soul, and the Stranger seems uninterested in dislodging them from this position, as long as they are willing to admit,

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50Note that there is possibly some logical space in between the Stranger’s two options. What about substances like air or fire—precisely the substances of which the soul was thought to be composed in pre-Socratic science—which yield without offering “contact and touch?”

51Plato writes very carefully here: the body is said to κοινωνεῖν γενέσει, while the soul is said to [κοινωνεῖν] πρὸς τὴν ὄντως ὀνείρα. The variation in syntax hints, I take it, at the asymmetry (brought out strongly in my translation above) between the two relations. The body is itself part of “becoming,” while the soul is not part of “real being.”
at least, that the virtues are incorporeal. The “friends of the forms,” meanwhile, maintain almost precisely the position of Socrates in the Affinity Argument in the *Phaedo*, stressing the soul’s contact with the intelligible realm without insisting that it is incorporeal.

The reference to incorporeality in the *Statesman* (285d-286a) involves the Forms as well. Here the Eleatic Stranger is justifying the long investigation of the art of weaving undertaken in the dialogue. Relationships of resemblance among sensible things, he says, are easily perceived, while for “the greatest and most valuable things” there is no “image clearly produced for human beings.” Therefore we must practice in order to be able to provide an account of them. “For bodiless things (ἀσώματα),” he says, “being the most beautiful and the greatest, are clearly displayed only to reason (λόγῳ) and in no other way” (286a5-7). It is for the sake of these “greatest” things that the whole conversation is being undertaken. This description of these “greatest things” as graspable only by reason (i.e. through dialectical investigation) corresponds to how the Forms are characterized elsewhere in the Platonic corpus (cf. e.g. *Republic* 532a-b, 534b-d; *Timaeus* 27d-28a).

The *Philebus* passage is the most unusual. Socrates and Protarchus are nearing the climax of their discussion of the mixture that constitutes the best life when Socrates says: “Our present discussion (ὁ νῦν λόγος) appears to me to have been completed, like (καθαπερεί) a bodiless order that will rule finely over an ensouled body” (64b). Taken in isolation, the words κόσμος τις ἀσώματος ἀρξὼν καλῶς ἐμψύχου σώματος might appear to refer to soul. But the context shows that this is not the case. First of all, this is a simile: Socrates is comparing the argument in the dialogue (concerning how we should live) to a “bodiless order.” Second, this order will rule over a body already attached to a soul. Thus even within the simile, the “bodiless order” seems distinct from the soul. That a λόγος or a κόσμος (a kind of arrangement, much like a harmonia) can be “bodiless” fully accords with what we have seen in the *Phaedo*. 
These passages show that the Forms, to which the soul has privileged access, are conceived of as incorporeal.\footnote{In saying this, I do not mean to stake out any dogmatic position about the nature of the Forms. Some of what Socrates says in the \textit{Phaedo} might suggest that the Forms are merely notions or concepts, which could still plausibly be called incorporeal. See further \S\ \ref{sec:ph}.} Plato’s positing of such entities represents a significant philosophical innovation over pre-Socratic corporealism. At the same time, such incorporeality is never explicitly granted to the soul—and for good reason. Nonetheless, my argument up to this point may seem to have turned to an excessive degree on the mere presence or absence of technical terminology in order to produce an unsatisfyingly negative result. To get a better sense of Plato’s positive ideas about soul, we must turn to the \textit{Timaeus}.

\section*{2.3 The construction of immortal soul in the \textit{Timaeus} (34b-44d)}

The \textit{Timaeus} offers the most detailed and perplexing account of the nature of soul in the Platonic corpus.\footnote{Two recent and valuable discussions of soul in the \textit{Timaeus} are Johansen 2004, 137-159 and Broadie 2012, 84-114. Cornford 1937 is essential for a basic understanding of the text. On the issue of immortality specifically, see Robinson 1990 and the response by Mason 1994.} It is the only one of Plato’s works discussed at length in the \textit{De anima} of Aristotle, who thus seems to take it as the definitive statement of his teacher’s view. While the dialogue’s main speaker, Timaeus, makes no attempt to furnish something like a deductive proof for the soul’s postmortem survival, the idea of immortality is central to the “likely story” that he presents about the cosmos and the place of human beings within it.\footnote{A point aptly emphasized by Broadie 2012, 97-99.} Crucially, for Timaeus human souls have both a mortal and an immortal element. This section concerns how Timaeus describes the nature of the immortal soul, with a focus on the construction of the cosmic soul (34c-37c) and the insertion of individual souls into mortal animals (41b-44d). I argue that, although the question of the soul’s corporeality is not directly addressed in the \textit{Timaeus}, the soul as described there does at least have many corporeal or quasi-corporeal attributes. My concern at this point is strictly to show that the \textit{Timaeus} accords with my interpretation of the \textit{Phaedo} as regards the incorporeality of the...
The broader question of in what sense Timaeus endorses psychic immortality will be dealt with in the next chapter (§ 3.2).

For Timaeus, the cosmos as a whole is a living animal, created by the benevolent activity of a divine craftsman. As such, the cosmos has both a body and soul. A brief summary of the famously obscure account of the creation of the cosmic soul will be necessary here, both because it is much more detailed than the account of the creation of individual human souls, and because individual souls are structurally analogous to that of the cosmos.

The craftsman begins by combining his ingredients (35a-b). These are being (οὐσία), “the nature of the same” (ἡ ταὐτοῦ φύσις), and “the nature of the different” (ἡ τοῦ ἑτέρου φύσις). Of each of these three he takes two kinds: one that is “indivisible” (ἀμέριστος) and “always in the same condition” (ἀεὶ κατὰ ταῦτα ἐχοῦσα) and one that instead “comes to be as divisible among bodies.” Six ingredients are thus involved at first; these are combined in pairs into three mixtures, which are then mixed into one. The being that is “indivisible” (equivalent, I take it, to “incomposite”) and “always in the same condition” corresponds to the kind of being that belongs to the Forms in the Affinity Argument (Phaedo 78d). The soul contains this kind of being, but also an inferior kind, the divisible “being that comes to be” (οὐσία γεγομένη). One thing that this bizarre mixing process indicates is that, as the Affinity Argument also suggested, the human soul is in a way related or akin to the Forms, but not on the same ontological level as them.

The craftsman then divides his mixture by cutting off portions of increasing size, with measurements corresponding to a series of harmonic ratios (35b-36b). The process is described, perhaps deliberately, in a way that makes it difficult to visualize: it seems to result in one long strip of soul-stuff. This strip the craftsman cuts lengthwise down the middle into two, which he lays out in the form of a X before bending them each back to form two circles, of which the inner one is then divided into seven smaller circles (36b-d). The craftsman then

55The presence of indivisible and divisible being in the soul, along with “the nature of the same” and “the nature of the different,” is also meant to explain the possibility of processes of cognition involving both Forms and sensibles, as Timaeus later says (37a-b). Aristotle sees this cognition as occurring according to the principle of “like-knows-like” (De anima 404b16-18).
sets all these circles into perpetual rotating motion at various speeds in different directions (36c-e). The outer circle is responsible for the (apparent) rotation of the sphere of the fixed stars, while the seven inner circles govern planetary orbits. Finally, cosmic soul and body are joined together, with the craftsman somewhat surprisingly putting the cosmic body inside the soul, so that soul is “woven through the heaven from the middle to the outer limit in every direction” (36d-e).

So much for the soul of the cosmos. A little later in the *Timaeus*, the craftsman undertakes to create the living things within it (39a-40e). He first creates the race of gods (i.e. the stars) to whom he will partially delegate responsibility for creating the human race. The craftsman makes a speech to them, beginning as follows:

> “Gods of gods, of whom I am the craftsman—you are my works—and father, what has come to be through me is indissoluble (*ἄλυτα*), at least if I do not wish it [to be dissolved]. Everything bound together is dissoluble (*τὸ μὲν οὖν δὲν δεθὲν πᾶν λυτόν*), but it would be evil to want to dissolve what is beautifully fitted together and in a good condition. On account of which, and since you have in fact come to be, you are not entirely immortal or indissoluble (*ἀθάνατοι μὲν οὐκ ἐστὲ οὐδὲν ἄλυτοι τὸ πάμπαν*), but you will not be dissolved nor face the fate of death, receiving my will (*βουλήσεως*) as a greater and more sovereign bond than those with which you were bound when you came to be.” (41a-b)

The craftsman here appeals to the Simplicity Principle, while apparently associating being composite with having come to be, such that everything generated is in some sense composite. Strikingly, the gods are thus not “entirely immortal.” They are in principle destructible, because they are composite (“bound together”). Yet the gods’ permanent survival is nonetheless guaranteed: only the craftsman himself could destroy them, but since only an evil force...
would dissolve anything “beautifully fitted together,” and the craftsman himself is entirely good (cf. 29e), this is not an actual risk. The gods, in Aristotle’s terms, are potentially destructible, but this potentiality will never be actualized. (Aristotle in fact holds that this is impossible, and that everything potentially destructible will be destroyed; cf. De caelo I.10-12.) Only the creation of the bodies of the gods is mentioned, not their souls: these bodies are made of fire and are apparently very durable (cf. 40a, 43a). The conditional kind of immortality that the gods enjoy is thus granted to corporeal things.

The craftsman proceeds to explain the division of labor between himself and his gods in the creation of humans (41c-d). He will provide the immortal soul, while the gods will handle the rest, “weaving mortal to immortal.” The craftsman’s own contribution is then briefly described: “into the mixing bowl, in which he had earlier mixed and combined the soul of the universe, he poured back the leftovers of the earlier process, and mixed them in somewhat the same way (τρόπον μὲν τινα τὸν αὐτὸν), but no longer with the same degree of purity.” The upshot of this very compressed description is that the immortal part of an individual human soul is structurally a miniature version of the soul of the cosmos, likewise involving rotating circles, though somehow inferior in its composition. The lesser gods take this resulting “immortal principle of the mortal animal” (ἀθάνατον μὲν των θνητοῦ ζώου, 42e) and place it into bodies. Sudden exposure to the flood of nourishment and sensation violently disturbs the regular rotation of the two “divine circuits (περίοδοι) of the soul” (43a), and it is only with much time and education that their natural motion can be restored (44b-c).

The immortal human soul in the Timaeus is thus a generated, composite thing. Like the gods, it is therefore at least in principle liable to dissolution. It is presented as being in circular, rotational motion and as having spatial extension and place, being located in the

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58 The sentence ends with a further qualification: after ἀκήρατα δὲ οὐκέτι κατὰ ταὐτὰ ὡσαύτως, Timaeus adds ἀλλὰ δεύτερα καὶ τρίτα (41d6-7). I confess to being unsure how to interpret this text (the transmission of which has never been doubted). But the general point, that the human soul is in some way inferior to that of the cosmos, seems clear.

59 The word σύνθετον is not used, but σύστασις is (36b7, d9).
“spherical body” of the head (44d). Once embodied, the immortal soul is liable to being directly (and drastically) affected by the body and the external, corporeal world. Timaeus admittedly is clear that soul is invisible (36e, 46d). But this claim, also made in the Phaedo, does not rule out the possibility that the soul could be made of a very fine-grained or gaseous corporeal substance. Since Timaeus thus assigns the soul so many qualities that we might associate with corporeality, it is unsurprising that he never claims that it is incorporeal (the term ἀσώματος is absent from the dialogue).

Scholars have nonetheless insisted that Timaeus thinks that the immortal soul is incorporeal, if not in precisely our sense of the term. But the passages put forward as supporting this view are of at most ambiguous significance. Four passages are particularly relevant:

[1] “[The cosmos] came to be: for it is visible (ὄρατός) and tangible (ἄπτός) and has soma, and all such things are perceptible (αἰσθητά). But perceptible things, which are grasped by opinion along with perception, clearly come to be and are born.” (28b)

[2] “What came to be [i.e. the cosmos] must be bodily (σωματειδές) and visible and tangible (ὁρατὸν ἁπτόν τε), but nothing without fire could ever become visible, nor tangible without something solid (στερεώ), nor solid without earth. Therefore the god began to make the body of the universe (τὸ τοῦ παντὸς σῶμα) by composing it out of fire and earth.” (31b)

Passages [1] and [2] agree that the cosmos has a visible and tangible body. But visibility and tangibility are treated as qualities that bodies can possess, not as necessary qualities of all bodies. Timaeus’s statement in [2] that visibility requires fire and that solidity and tangibility require earth in fact suggests that there can be invisible, non-solid, and non-tangible bodies. To be “solid” (στερεῶ) here apparently means something like “offering firm

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60 Timaeus later criticizes as a kind of “dreaming” the intuition that “everything that is is in some place and occupies some space” (τὸ ὄν ἀπαν ἐν τινι τόπῳ καὶ κατέχον χώραν τινά, 52b). As Broadie 2012, 173-242 argues, it seems his purpose here is to defend the existence of the Forms, despite the fact that they are not in place. That the soul in the Timaeus is in place is thus another point of difference between it and the Forms.

61 Cf. e.g. Sedley 1990, 317-319; Broadie 2012, 94, 180, 280; and Johansen 2004, 140-141, who suggests that “for Timaeus body is differentiated from soul by having specific spatial attributes (such as depth and solidity) rather than by the possession of spatial attributes as such.”

62 It would be linguistically possible to take τὸ γενόμενον to refer to anything that comes to be—with the result that soul would have to be bodily—but it seems better to assume that it refers just to the cosmos. (I here follow Broadie 2012, 90n19.)
resistance.” Water and air, seen in this way, are not solids. So far, nothing prevents the soul (which is invisible, non-solid, and non-tangible) from being a body of some sort.

[3] “When the construction of the [cosmic] soul had come to be to the satisfaction of the constructor, after this he built inside of the soul all the bodily (πᾶν τὸ σωματοειδὲς) and fitted them to each other, bringing together the middle of the soul and the middle of the body. The soul was woven through the heaven from the middle to the outer limit in every direction and covered it over all around on the outside. Revolving in itself, the soul made a divine beginning of unceasing and intelligent life for the whole of time. And the body of the heavens came to be as visible, but the soul was invisible (ἀόρατος), having a share in calculation and harmony, having come to be as the best of the things engendered by the best of the intelligible things that always are.” (36d-37a)

Note first that when the craftsman builds “all the bodily” inside of soul, we can take τὸ σωματοειδὲς as simply referring to the cosmic body, rather than to body as an ontological category. The relevant opposition is between body and soul, not between the corporeal and the incorporeal. Soul at the end of this passage is moreover distinguished from “the intelligible things that always are” (the craftsman and the Forms). The most important point, however, is that the cosmic soul is extensional in exactly the same way that the cosmic body is. Timaeus also says that the cosmic soul is “woven through” (διαπλακεῖσα) the cosmic body, a term that, taken literally, suggests the interpenetration of two corporeal substances.

[4] “It’s first of all clear to everyone, I suppose, that fire and earth and water and air are bodies. But all bodily form has depth (τὸ δὲ τοῦ σώματος εἶδος πᾶν καὶ βάθος ἐχεὶ). And it’s completely necessary for depth to include the nature of surface, and a flat surface is composed of triangles. All triangles are constituted by two triangles, each having one right and two acute angles. [The two triangles are described.] Let us assume this (ὑποτιθέμεθα) as the principle (ἀρχήν) of fire and the other bodies (τῶν ἄλλων σωμάτων), proceeding according to the likely account along with necessity. As for the principles even higher than these, god knows them, and whoever of men is dear to god.” (53c-d)

Nothing in this passage prevents soul from being some sort of body. As we have seen, soul must have depth, which Timaeus here says is characteristic of all bodies. (Of course, as Aristotle says, no pre-Socratic thought that the soul was made of earth anyway (De anima 405b8-9).
it remains possible that non-bodies might also have depth.) The phrase “the other bodies” later in the passage can refer to the other three bodies (besides fire) that are under discussion here, rather than all bodies in general.

This last passage, however, also points to a problem that may seem acute for my interpretation. The human soul for Timaeus is not made from any of the four basic stuffs (fire, air, water, and earth) that make up the human body (cf. 42e-43a), nor from the triangles from which these basic stuffs are themselves composed. Rather, the immortal human soul is apparently made, like the cosmic soul, from being, the same, and the different. Taken literally, the use of the language of “mixing” and “joining” might suggest that these ingredients are bodily stuffs, yet they certainly do not sound like bodily stuffs. This is perhaps the strongest point in favor of the view that the immortal human soul in the Timaeus is, implicitly, incorporeal. Against this, however, it can be pointed out that the triangles that compose the four basic stuffs also do not sound bodily, and Timaeus is deliberately reticent at the end of [4] about what these triangles are themselves made of. How geometrical shapes can come together to form corporeal stuffs is simply not explained. Given this, we should likewise not assume in the case of the abstract-sounding ingredients used to create the soul that their combination must yield an incorporeal substance.

After the Timaeus, there is one more important account of the nature of soul in the Platonic corpus, namely that found in the extended argument against atheism in the tenth book of the Laws, Plato’s final work. Since this is an exceedingly complex text, and one that will be relevant to other chapters as well, I relegate all consideration of it to Appendix 1. For present purposes, we can merely note the following points of agreement with the Timaeus (there are important differences as well, which I leave aside here). Soul in the Laws is something that has come to be, although its origin is not described. It is never directly called bodiless. It is in motion and in place, moving the human body by being inside it, presumably through some kind of interaction (cf. 893c, 898e). On the other hand, the Athenian Stranger’s main concern is to show that soul is prior to body, in the sense of
having come to be before the four basic elements (892a-b). The soul, in particular, is not made of fire or air, as many pre-Socratics would have had it (892c).

Although this evidence does not lend itself to an easy conclusion, it seems best to say only that the immortal human soul in the *Timaeus* (and the *Laws*) is not constructed out of the four bodily stuffs that make up the rest of the sensible world (rather than that it is incorporeal *tout court*). Although the soul’s status is never really elucidated, it is at any rate certainly composite, extended, in place, in motion, and able to interact with bodily things. Even if it is granted that the concept of body was still fluid in Plato’s time, such qualities could not be easily attributed to something entirely bodiless. Now if the immortal human soul in the *Timaeus* is bodily, then it is at the very least theoretically liable to dissolution, like the created gods. If and how the immortal soul nonetheless still deserves the appellation “immortal” is a topic for the next chapter.

### 2.4 The incorporeal soul in the Old Academy

There are of course good philosophical reasons to resist the view that the soul is incorporeal (most notably, the problem of soul-body interaction). So it may be entirely to Plato’s credit, philosophically speaking, that he attempts to move beyond the crude implicit corporealism of the pre-Socratics without explicitly embracing the notion of psychic incorporeality. Ultimately it must be conceded, however, that the view of the soul that emerges from the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus* is vague and unclear. Clearly, the soul is not on the same ontological level as either the corporeal objects in the sensory world or the Forms, yet few resources are provided to help us understand the soul’s intermediate status. It is hardly surprising, then, that some thinkers in the Old Academy quickly reduced Plato’s view to the more easily understandable position that it is entirely incorporeal, just as the Forms are. Other members of the Old Academy, however, seem to have worked out the position whereby the soul is some kind of body, though not one of the four basic elements. In this section, I will examine both these paths in turn (in a necessarily speculative way, given the nature of our evidence), in
order to provide an explanation of how Plato’s complex position came to be misrepresented in the later philosophical tradition.

A doctrine of the soul as incorporeal must have arisen rather quickly after Plato’s death, given how Epicurus (341-270 BCE) could complain, in the Letter to Herodotus, that “those who say that the soul is bodiless (ἀσώματον) are talking nonsense,” since “the soul couldn’t act or be acted on at all, if it was like that” (Diogenes Laertius X.67). The unnamed targets here must be thinkers in the Old Academy. The only bodiless thing that can be said to really exist in the terms of Epicurean physics is void, but void cannot act on anything or be affected, both of which the soul presumably must do. Epicurus accordingly holds that “the soul is a fine-grained body (ψυχή σῶμα ἐστι λεπτομερές) sown throughout the entire aggregate [i.e. the human body], most resembling breath (πνεύματι) with a certain mixture of heat” (X.63). As such, the soul is mortal. In a striking affirmation of Cebes’ worry in the Phaedo, for Epicurus the soul is simply “dispersed” (διασπείρεται) and loses its powers after death (X.65), though the atoms that composed it of course continue to exist.

In order to see how the notion of the incorporeal soul that Epicurus attacks first arose in the Academy, we can begin from Aristotle’s criticisms of the Timaeus in the De Anima (I.3). Here Plato’s theory is repeatedly placed alongside those of pre-Socratic corporealisists. After noting that “Plato in the Timaeus makes the soul from the elements” just like Empedocles (404b16-17), Aristotle enters into a polemic against views according to which the soul moves or is moved (other than incidentally), including those whereby “the soul moves the body in which it is (ἐν ᾧ ἐστιν) because it is itself in motion” (406b15-16). Aristotle’s first example of such a thinker is Democritus, who claims that the soul is made up of atoms that are always moving (406b17-25). “In the same way,” Aristotle then continues, “Timaeus also gives a natural scientist’s account (φυσιολογεῖ) of how the soul moves the body: because the soul is in motion it also moves the body, since it is woven together (συμπεπλέχθαι) to

65 It seems that ὁ Τίμαιος here must refer to Plato’s literary character (contrast Πλάτων ἐν τῷ Τιμαίῳ at 404b16). The locution seems to raise the possibility of a gap here between Plato and his character, which may be relevant to understanding the criticism. Timaeus is giving a natural-scientific explanation, which may not be the only or even the best possible explanation from Plato’s point of view.
it” (406b26-28). For Plato’s theory of the soul to be juxtaposed with that of the atomist Democritus without any remark is obviously very suggestive. Menn argues that Aristotle’s intention in this passage is to provide “an internal Platonist critique” of Plato for remaining too close to pre-Socratic natural science.

Assuming, correctly, that the immortal soul in the Timaeus is meant to represent the human intellect (νοῦς, 407a3-6), Aristotle then argues that what is responsible for intellection can be neither a magnitude (μέγεθος) nor in continuous, circular motion (407a6-b11). For our purposes, the more interesting criticism is the first. A magnitude must have parts, and Aristotle thinks that this leads to various absurdities rendering intellectual activity impossible. Will intellect cognize things with just one of its parts? If so, will it cognize the same thing many times over? Or, if once is enough, why need it be a magnitude at all? Finally, “how will it think about what has parts with what doesn’t (τὸ μεριστὸν ἀμερεῖ) or what doesn’t have parts with what does?” (407a18-19). Timaeus of course accounted for the cognition of both Forms and perceptibles by having the craftsman mix both indivisible and divisible being into the soul. But Aristotle seizes on this vocabulary of divisibility to make a more literal-minded complaint, based on the principle of like-knows-like. We will see that this notion that there must be a real similarity between what thinks and the object of thought (not present in Plato’s Affinity Argument) will play an important role in later Platonist arguments that the soul must incorporeal.

Aristotle notably does not formulate his critique in terms of incorporeality: he does not complain that Plato is committed to the view that the soul is incorporeal but is then inconsistent with himself. Rather, Aristotle just thinks that the specific body-like attributes are problematic in themselves. Perhaps he takes it for granted that the Platonic soul is corpo-

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66Notice that the last clause refers to how the craftsman joins the cosmic soul to the cosmic body, suggesting that Aristotle views the cosmic and human soul as entirely isomorphic, to the point of running together what are in fact their distinctive features (the human soul is never said in the Timaeus to be woven through the human body).

67Menn 2002, 102.

68Aristotle speaks of “so-called intellect” (ὁ καλούμενος νοῦς) to make clear that he is referring to the human intellect rather than νοῦς as god, the first mover of the cosmos. Cf. De anima 429a22-23 and 432b26.
real, or perhaps the issue so formulated does not interest him; the notion of incorporeality is hardly present in the De anima at all. Still, one can see how Aristotle’s criticism could have put pressure on followers of Plato to describe the soul in less body-like terms or even to declare it incorporeal, given that Plato’s introduction of the Forms had introduced the idea of (and the word for) incorporeality into philosophical parlance. Evidence that this strategy was taken up in the Academy is found in the pseudo-Platonic Epinomis, which bills itself as a continuation of Plato’s Laws. Here the Athenian Stranger says:

“According to the likely account one must say that there are five solid bodies (στερεὰ σώματα), from which one might shape the best and most beautiful things, but the whole other kind has one form (τὸ δὲ ἄλλο γένος ἄπαν ἔχει μορφὴν μίαν). For there is nothing that might come to be as bodiless (ἀσώματον) and having in no way any color at all except for the most truly divine kind, that of soul (τὸ θειότατον ὄντως ψυχῆς γένος). It belongs pretty much only to this to shape and craft, but it belongs to body, as we say, to be shaped and to come to be and to be seen. It belongs to soul—let us say it again, for it must be said not just once—to be unseen and knowing and intelligible, having a share in memory and calculation through shifts of odd and even. Since the bodies are five, one must say that they are fire and water and, in third place, air, then earth in fourth, and in fifth ether.” (981b-c)

In contrast to the genuine Platonic texts considered earlier, this one does explicitly attribute incorporeality to soul. As Tarán points out, by insisting on the exhaustiveness of body and soul as an ontological taxonomy, the passage also seems to deny the separate existence of the Forms. The Epinomis is thus the work of some member of the Old Academy who experimented with various revisions of Plato’s views while attempting to pass them off as Plato’s own.

69 Aristotle says that the greatest dispute about first principles (ἀρχαί) of the soul is “between those who make them bodily and those who make them bodiless, and those who mix them and declare the first principles to be from both” (404b31-405a2). But this programmatic statement is not followed up with a thematic discussion of incorporeality, and in three of the four later occurrences of ἀσώματος in the work (all are in the first book, devoted mainly to critiquing earlier thinkers), the word is a synonym for λεπτομερής (“fine-grained”), i.e. virtually bodiless: 405a6-7, 450a2-27, 405b1-12, 409b21. (The third instance is the most doubtful, but its sense is clarified by the fourth, which is a back-reference.)

70 The authenticity of the work was debated already in antiquity; Diogenes Laertius reports that some thought Philip of Opus to have written it (III.37). For the modern case against authenticity, cf. Tarán 1975.

71 Tarán 1975, 262-263. Cf. also 983d, where beings as a whole are classified as either soul or body. Admittedly, the Forms already play a very marginal role in the Laws; as in the Epinomis, soul and body there often seem to be the main constituents of what is (cf. esp. 904a-b). The tendency to diminish the status of the Forms and read Plato as having taught a system with just two first principles was widespread in the Old Academy; see Sedley 2002.
A key figure in the development of the notion of an incorporeal soul was doubtless Xenocrates (396-314 BCE), the third head of the Academy after Plato and Speusippus. Nemesius preserves the following argument attributed to him: “if the soul is nourished (τρέφεται), it is nourished by the incorporeal (ὑπ᾽ ἀσωμάτου). For the subjects of learning (τὰ μαθήματα) nourish it. But no body is nourished by the incorporeal. So the soul is not a body” (De natura hominis 2.19). Cicero likewise tells us that Xenocrates “denied that the soul had a shape or any sort of body (figuram et quasi corpus), but said it was a number” (Tusculan Disputations I.20). Xenocrates’ view that the soul was a self-moving number is probably an attempt to make sense of the intermediate status of soul in the Phaedo and the Timaeus (compare the theory of mathematical objects in between Forms and perceptibles, attributed to Plato by Aristotle) along with the discussion of its self-motion in the Phaedrus and the Laws. This is the kind of view that Epicurus criticizes as nonsense.

Let us now turn to the opposite strategy, whereby an attempt was made to elaborate a coherent corporealist account of Plato’s position. Here the narrative I construct will be even more speculative, given the nature of our sources. We can again begin with Aristotle. In the De caelo (I.2-3), he argues for the existence of a fifth type of body (besides earth, water, fire, and air) that is responsible for the movement of the heavens. Although he does not fully embrace the term himself, he identifies this fifth body with the popular notion of “ether” (αἰθήρ) as a celestial stuff. Its natural motion is circular (just as the natural motion of the four sublunary bodies is to move either up or down). It is more divine than and prior to (θειότέρα καὶ προτέρα, 269a31-32) the four bodies found below in the sublunary world and is moreover “eternal, having neither growth nor diminution, ageless, inalterable, and unaffected” (270b1-2).

We have in addition the later testimony of Cicero that Aristotle’s “fifth kind” (quintum genus) was what both “stars and minds” (astra mentesque) were made of (Academica I.26, 72

72 Cf. Thiel 2006, 331. Aristotle criticizes (without mentioning Xenocrates by name) the view that the soul is an ἀριθμὸς κυών ἑαυτών as “by far the most unreasonable of the things that are said” (De anima 408b32-33).
On this view, the human soul (or part of it, at any rate) is made up of the fifth element. Now Aristotle (with one possible exception\textsuperscript{73}) does not suggest anything like this in his extant works, and scholars have doubted that Cicero can be right in thinking that Aristotle, at any stage of his career, held such a corporealist view of the human soul.\textsuperscript{74} What has not been considered, however, is how attractive some version of the view found in Cicero would have been to someone attempting to make sense of Plato’s dialogues from a corporealist perspective. This view preserves, in one stroke, the Platonic claims that the soul is immortal, in circular motion like that of the cosmos (as Timaeus says), and also not composed of any other four basic elements but instead “prior” to them (as the Athenian Stranger in \textit{Laws} X insists). Even if Cicero’s report is confused and Aristotle in particular never held this view, it would have been a natural line of thought in the context of the Old Academy.

Perhaps we can even associate this view with a particular student of Plato, namely Heraclides of Pontus, who apparently viewed the soul as made from a kind of “heavenly body,”\textsuperscript{75} possibly inspired by a strand of popular belief that associated soul with ether.\textsuperscript{76} Interestingly, the author of the passage from the \textit{Epinomis} quoted above seems concerned to oppose this particular solution. He or she is aware of the theory of ether as a fifth element and (unlike Aristotle) even gives it a Platonic pedigree by identifying it with the fifth perfect

\textsuperscript{73}A possible connection between the fifth-element and pneumatic theories of soul appears in an anomalous and much-debated passage of \textit{De generatione animalium} (736b29-737a7), where Aristotle suggests that “the power of all soul seems to share in another body that is more divine than the so-called elements.” He calls this body πνεῦμα and says that “the nature in the πνεῦμα is analogous to the element of the stars.” This would seem to suggest that the soul is made up of a fifth-element, which is not however the same as what the stars are made of.

\textsuperscript{74}See Easterling\textsuperscript{1964} Hahm\textsuperscript{1982}.

\textsuperscript{75}For the fragments of Heraclides on soul see Schütrumpf\textsuperscript{2008} 118-133. His view is often summarized by saying that he held the soul to be “light-like” or “light” (φωτοειδής, Stobaeus I.49.1; lumen, Macrobius, \textit{In Somnium Scipionis} I.14.19), but light in antiquity was often considered a body. In Stobaeus his view is listed among the corporealists (between Democritus and Leucippus) and Philoponus, in his commentary on Aristotle’s \textit{De anima}, says that Heraclides called soul an αἴθεριον or οὐράνιον σῶμα (vol. XV, p. 9. Hayduck). For discussion of the possible relationship between the view of Heraclides and theories of a fifth element, see Kupreeva\textsuperscript{2009a} 120-133.

\textsuperscript{76}Cf. e.g. a famous inscription from the Kerameikos in Athens commemorating those fallen at Poteidaia in 432 BCE at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War (\textit{IG} I\textsuperscript{3} 1179, cf. Obryk\textsuperscript{2012} 14-17), where it is said that the ether will receive the souls of the dead.
solid from the *Timaeus* but explicitly distinguishes it from soul—perhaps in order to rule out a rival Academic position.

There is more. Consider another passage in Cicero’s *Academica*, where the character Varro is discussing the view of Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, who apparently studied at the Academy in the late fourth century under Polemo, the fourth scholarch. Varro presents Zeno as basically accepting the physics standard in the Old Academy at the time, with just a few innovations:

“As to natural principles, he [Zeno] thought the following. First, he did not accept along with the four elements of things that fifth principle, from which earlier figures (*superiores*) thought that the senses and the mind (*sensus et mentem*) were made. For he held that fire was that principle that gave birth to everything, including mind and the senses. But he also disagreed with the same people (*isdem*), because he thought that in no way could anything be done (*effici*) by a nature that lacked body (*ab ea quae exsors esset corporis*), of which kind Xenocrates and earlier figures (*superiores*) said that the soul (*animum*) was. Indeed, Zeno thought that neither what acts on something nor what is acted upon could not be a body.” (I.39)

Commentators have been puzzled as to why Cicero would say that Zeno is reacting against the theory of his *superiores* to the effect that the mind is made of the fifth substance, given that earlier in the same book Cicero suggested only that Aristotle held this view (cf. I.26). Since the accuracy of the earlier report is questionable anyway, I suggest that this later passage provides a more accurate picture: various people in the Academy (including Heraclides and perhaps, but not necessarily, Aristotle at some stage of his career) thought that soul was made of the fifth element.

Zeno’s *superiores* who think that the senses and the mind are made of the fifth principle can hardly be the same as *Xenocrates et superiores* who think that the soul is made of “a nature that lacked body.” Cicero must thus be referring to two distinct groups of in the Academy; Zeno is opposed to both. On the one hand, he does not accept the formulation of psychic corporealism involving a fifth element; rather, at least according to this report in

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77This is the icosahedron (cf. *Timaeus* 55a-c). *Timaeus* does not identify it with ether, but cryptically says that the craftsman uses it up “painting the universe” (*ἐπὶ τὸ πᾶν ... διαζωγράφων*, 55c)

78Cf. Kupreeva 2009, 139.
Cicero, he thought that the soul was made of fire. On the other hand, Zeno also criticizes the idea of an incorporeal soul by pointing to the problem of interaction between soul and body: only bodies can act or be acted on. (The Stoics did have a theory of incorporeals, ἀσώματα, but seem to have denied that they could be involved in causal interactions.)

In Diogenes Laertius we find a more complicated report on the soul’s nature according to both Zeno and his successors, which also deals with the Stoic attitude towards immortality:

The Stoics hold that nature is a craftsmanlike fire (πῦρ τεχνικὸν), progressing on the path towards generation, which is a fiery and craftsmanly breath (πνεῦμα πυροειδὲς καὶ τεχνοειδές). The soul, they say, is nature that perceives (αἰσθητικὴν φύσιν). This is the breath inborn in us (τὸ συμφυὲς ἡμῖν πνεῦμα). Therefore the soul is also a body and remains after death. It exists as corruptible (φθαρτήριον), but the soul of the whole is incorruptible, and parts of this are in living things. Zeno of Citium and Antipater, in his On the Soul, and Posidonius say that soul is hot breath (πνεῦμα ἔνθερμον). Because of it we are alive (ἔμπνους) and are moved by it. Cleanthes said that all souls remain up until the conflagration, but Chrysippus said that only those of the wise do. (VII.156-157)

Here the Stoic soul is said to be a “fiery breath.” It is thus, on their view, corporeal and corruptible, but also able to survive death (at least temporarily). It is moreover part of a larger whole, the world soul, which lasts forever. A full account of the traditions that shaped the Stoics’ pneumatic theory of soul is beyond my scope; my aim is merely to suggest that the Stoic view can be viewed as a development of a corporealist view of the soul that was current in the Old Academy.

Now the Academics who declared the soul to be incorporeal advanced a position that is at best unsupported, at worst contradicted by Plato’s own texts. Paradoxically, it thus seems that the Stoics, whose corporealism would later make them the great opponents of

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80 Zeno’s view on the soul’s survival after death is not given here, but according to another report (in Epiphanius, cf. SVF I 146 and Hoven 1971, 46) he called the soul a πολυχρόνιον πνεῦμα that was not imperishable, but was worn out over a long period of time. Note that not everyone saw the pneumatic theory of soul as incompatible with immortality: Socrates in the pseudo-Platonic (probably Hellenistic) Aziocclus connects the soul’s immortality with how it contains a θεῖον πνεῦμα (370b-d).
81 On the eternality of the world soul, despite periodic conflagrations, cf. Plutarch, De Stoicorum repugnantissi 1052c-1053b.
82 As also suggested by Dillon 2009, 354-355.
the Platonists, in fact came closer to Plato’s own conception of the soul than most of Plato’s putative successors. Although nothing like the Stoic view is explicitly elaborated in Plato’s dialogues, it does seem to be a possible and even attractive reading of the various hints that they contain. On this view—I offer here only a sketchy and speculative reconstruction—Plato conceived of human souls as composed of portions of some quasi-corporeal soul-stuff. By “quasi-corporeal,” I mean having the typical properties of bodies, for example extension and motion, but not composed from the four basic stuffs that compose most of the perceptible bodies that we encounter. Souls on this view would probably not be literally immortal: the soul-stuff itself is in itself indestructible, but the individuated portions of it that constitute human souls may be reincorporated after death into a collectively immortal psychic mass.

One worry for this picture is whether it can be squared with what Plato says about the individuation of souls and their reincarnation. In the Republic, Socrates offers a brief (and problematic) argument that the number of souls always remains the same (611a). And in the Timaeus, the craftsman is said to have divided the soul-stuff into a number equal to that of the stars (σύστησας τὸ πᾶν διεῖλεν ψυχὰς ἰσαρίθμους τοῖς ἄστροις, 41d), such that each soul is associated with a particular star, to which it returns after death if it has lived a satisfactory life (42b). Broadie, in discussing the Timaeus, places great emphasis on Plato’s view of the soul as thus individualized:

Why are the rational souls of mortals, in Timaeus’s story, not borrowed portions of the cosmic soul, destined to merge back into it on the death of the body? The obvious response is: it is because such portions would not be individuals, and Plato sees souls as individualised—that’s why he portrays them as having a distinct genesis. One could also point out that equating them with portions of the cosmic soul would cause difficulty in a system that includes the doctrine of reincarnation.

Broadie implicitly contrasts Timaeus’s view, whereby each soul is individually created and then continually reincarnated, with the Stoic position, whereby our souls are “offshoots”

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83 No souls can be destroyed, nor can new immortal souls be created; they would have to be created from what is mortal, so that (Socrates claims) in the end everything would become immortal, per impossibile. The argument is discussed and found wanting by Brown 1997, 234-238.

84 Broadie 2012, 95.
of the cosmic soul (ἀποσπάσματα, Diogenes Laertius VII.143) and return to it after our deaths. But it does not seem to me that what Broadie thinks is at stake in this contrast is really at stake. Are Stoic souls not individuals, in the sense of (for instance) having moral responsibility for their actions? As long as human souls are clearly delineated portions of soul-stuff or of the world soul during this life, this suffices to account for individuality in the sense that is meaningful for us.

Furthermore, it seems that what Timaeus in fact says in mythological form about our postmortem destiny lends itself to a non-literal, demythologized reading that accords with the kind of corporealist view I have attributed to Heraclides. Roughly, the soul-stuff is divided into individual portions—not once and for all by the craftsman at the beginning of time, but whenever a living thing is born. After death the soul stuff either returns to the heavens—not to its own particular star, but to the starry region in general—or is reused to animate a new living thing. While on the mythological version souls persist individually and are reincarnated, on the demythologized reading soul-stuff is collectively recycled across the generations, such that soul-stuff that was once in a human could be found in an animal. (This reading of course strips reincarnation of its moral significance as a punishment, which is the point of the mythological presentation.) Perhaps certain Academics and early Stoics read the Timaeus along these lines.

2.5 The Platonists on the incorporeal soul

The texts considered in the previous section reflect an era of vibrant debate in Athens in the 4th century BCE, during the formation of the Hellenistic philosophical schools. It is likely that the originators of the various views about the soul current in the Academy during this period saw these views as simply their own—certainly inspired by Plato, but not necessarily intended as interpretations of what Plato himself had thought or written. But when dogmatic Platonism began to be revived under the Roman empire on the basis of the study of Plato’s texts, the notion of an incorporeal soul that had originated in a certain faction of the Old
Academy centuries before came to be presented in the school tradition as a genuine Platonic doctrine.

Consider for instance the summary of the Affinity Argument from the Phaedo that is offered in the Didaskalikos of Alcinous, written sometime after the reign of Augustus:

[The soul] is bodiless being (ἀσώματος οὐσία), unchangeable with respect to its substance, and intelligible and unseen and uniform. Thus it is incomposite, indissoluble, unscatterable. The body, on the contrary, is sensible, visible, scatterable, composite, multiform. And indeed when the soul through the body comes to be in contact with the sensible, it is dizzy and troubled and like someone drunk, but when it comes to be alone by itself in contact with the intelligible, it halts and is at rest. The soul is not like (ἔοικεν) that which it is troubled to be in contact with. So it is more like the intelligible, which is by nature unscatterable and indestructible. And indeed the soul leads by nature, and what leads by nature is like the divine. So the soul, being like the divine, would be indestructible and incorruptible. (25.1)

The correspondences to the structure of Plato’s text are precise: Socrates’ three lines of argument for the similarity of the soul to the intelligible are all reported. But although the soul is still said to be merely “like” the intelligible and divine, questions about its nature have been decided: it is now said to be bodiless, immutable, incomposite, indestructible, and incorruptible.

Given that Alcinous claims to be merely presenting Plato’s doctrines in a pedagogical format, it is tempting to label him a careless reader. But in fact his inaccurate interpretation reflects the development of the Platonist school in opposition to the philosophical challenge posed by Stoic corporealism. It was in this context that positing and defending the existence of incorporeal entities became a signature Platonist preoccupation. In this section I will illustrate this development as regards the soul by briefly surveying the relationship between the soul’s immortality and incorporeality in three Platonist texts: the Enneads of Plotinus (204-270 CE), the Starting-Points to the Intelligibles of Porphyry (234-205 CE), and the Elements of Theology of Proclus (412-485 CE).

Alcinous also says that according to Plato god, qualities, and active causes are all incorporeal (10.7-11.2). My overall picture of the relationship between Plato, the Stoics, so-called “Middle Platonists” like Alcinous, and Plotinus is indebted to Menn 1998, 73-129, who should be consulted for further detail.
Plotinus’s treatise “On the Immortality of the Soul” (Ennead IV.7) is the most detailed dedicated treatment of the immortality of the soul that we possess from the Platonist tradition after Plato. Plotinus begins in the first chapter by asking what in a human being is immortal. He argues that the body cannot be, explicitly linking its mortality to its nature as a composite thing: “the body, being itself composite (συγκείμενον), cannot reasonably persist, and perception moreover sees it being dissolved and melting away and liable to all kinds of destruction” (1.8-11). This applies not just to the human body: even “simple bodies” (τὰ ἁπλὰ τῶν σωμάτων), e.g. partless atoms, are compositions of form and matter and as such can be decomposed (1.16-17). In fact, as Plotinus later puts it “every body is a composite” (αὐτὸς ἁπλὸς ἡμών ςάμα, 2.2). The logical relationship between corporeality and compositeness (and thus destructibility, by the Simplicity Principle) is immediately made explicit, in a way that it was not in Plato’s Affinity Argument.

But, Plotinus continues, it is the soul, not the destructible body, that is “the human being himself” (αὐτὸς ἁπλὸς ἡμών, 1.22-23). He accordingly turns to the question of “what nature” the soul itself has (2.1). The first option that he considers is that the soul itself is a body. In striking contrast to Plato’s reticence on this issue, two-thirds of Plotinus’s treatise (Chapters 2-8) is devoted to a barrage of arguments comprehensively “refuting” this view. One brief argument targets Epicurean atomism (3.1-5), but the main opponents throughout are clearly the Stoics, even though here, as always, Plotinus refrains from naming either the

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86 According to Porphyry’s Life of Plotinus, it was only the second work that his teacher composed (around 254 CE). Its influence was in any case destined to be considerable: large portions of it were quoted verbatim by Eusebius, the fourth-century bishop of Caesarea, in his Praeparatio Evangelica, while loose translations of various excerpts are preserved in the ninth-century Arabic Theologia Aristotelis. Chapters 8.1-8.5, preserved only by this indirect tradition, were not translated in the Renaissance by Ficino, who is responsible for the modern chapter divisions in Plotinus; hence the unconventional numbering. Longo 2009, 33-37 gives a good summary of the unusually complex problems of textual transmission.

87 No argument is offered for this claim, but presumably Plotinus is thinking of a famous argument in the First Alcibiades (129b-130d) leading to the conclusion that “a human being is nothing other than a soul,” which uses the body like a tool. (Whether this text is actually by Plato is unimportant for our purposes; it was accepted as a not only authentic but in fact central Platonic text by all ancient commentators.) In the last sentence of the first chapter, however, Plotinus leaves open the question of whether the soul is related to the body “as a user to a tool” or, in a vaguely Aristotelian alternative, “as form to matter.” We need not assume, as O’Daly 1973, 21 does, that the statement to the effect that the soul is the self contradicts the mature view of Plotinus found in e.g. Ennead I.1 (cf. § 3.3), as Plotinus often uses somewhat imprecise, approximate views as starting points in his treatises.
school or its representatives. Plotinus also then attacks (in Chapters 8\textsuperscript{4} and 8\textsuperscript{5}) two views that make the soul “different from body, but belonging to body,” namely the \textit{harmonia} theory familiar from the \textit{Phaedo} and the Aristotelian view of soul as an actuality (ἐντελέχεια).

Establishing the soul’s incorporeal nature is thus, for Plotinus, the most important step in demonstrating its immortality. Our three surviving Platonist commentaries on the \textit{Phaedo} (written by Olympiodorus and Damascius in the sixth century CE, but reflecting a long prior school tradition) give us evidence for a debate over whether Plotinus’s basic approach here to showing the soul’s immortality is an original one, distinct from Plato’s Affinity Argument. As I have already noted, the common opinion among Platonist readers of the \textit{Phaedo} was that the Affinity Argument proves that the soul is longer-lasting than the body, but not immortal. The commentators agreed, however, that Plato’s argument did show the soul to be both incomposite and incorporeal. Damascius therefore calls into question the originality of Plotinus:

Plotinus thought that he was the first to show that the soul is immortal by demonstrating that it is neither a body nor inseparable from body (ἄχωριστον σώματος), as these are the things for which death is naturally able to come about: for the one because it is composite and can be dissolved into what composes it, for the other because it is in a subject (ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ), and if this is destroyed the incorporeal thing in it will be destroyed too. But Plato provided this demonstration in this argument, showing that the soul is neither a body, since it is incomposite and invisible, nor in a body, since it can rule and think. (\textit{In Phaedonem} II.29)

Damascius does admit, however, that while the Affinity Argument provided Plotinus his “starting-points” (ἀφορμαὶ), the two arguments are not in fact the same, given that Plato does not begin from the same consideration of the two ways in which any thing can be destroyed (cf. \textit{In Phaedonem} I.311). Plotinus thus offers, while Plato does not, a complete proof of the soul’s immortality.

There is not space here to review all of the many arguments that Plotinus marshals in service of the view that the soul is not a body. Their philosophical merit is variable, as can be seen from a glance at one family of arguments, developed in the eighth chapter of \textit{Ennead} IV.7, which aim to show that if soul was a body, it would be impossible to think (νοεῖν). The
first argument offered is based on the difference between thinking (νόησις) and perception (αἴσθησις):

[1] “Perceiving (ἀισθάνεσθαι) is the soul grasping (ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι) sensibles using the body” (8.2-4).

[2] Thinking is also the soul grasping things, including sensibles.

[3] Thinking (νοεῖν) must be different from perception.

[4] Thinking must not use the body, since otherwise it would turn out to be the same as perception (8.4-5)

[5] What will think (τὸ νοῆσον), i.e. the soul, must not be a body (8.6-7).

[2] and [3] are unstated but plausible assumptions. So reconstructed, the argument is fallacious, relying on a bald equivocation between two uses of soma, for “the human body” in [1]-[4] and for “body in general,” i.e. anything corporeal, in [5].

In what follows, Plotinus adopts a different strategy, suggesting that it would be impossible for a bodily soul to think given what the objects of cognition are like. Plotinus thinks that even a corporealist must concede that there are at least “thoughts of some intelligible things and grasplings of things without magnitude” (8.9-10). How, then, will a body, which necessarily has magnitude (μέγεθος), “think what is not magnitude, or what is divisible into parts with what isn’t?” (8.10-11). Here Plotinus is obviously paraphrasing the criticism in the De anima (407a18-19) discussed above—a striking instance of how Aristotle’s objection to Plato had become in fact part of the standard Platonist position. At the end of the chapter, Plotinus tries another, related tactic: given that the virtues and geometrical concepts are eternal, they cannot be in something that is not itself eternal. But bodies, which are in flux, are not eternal. So given that virtues and geometrical concepts are in the soul, the soul cannot be a body (8.42-45).

Given how in Ennead IV.7 Plotinus (reasonably) sees establishing the incorporeal nature of the soul as the prerequisite for securing its immortality, it is somewhat surprising to

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88 I completely disagree with the favorable analysis of this argument in Kalligas 2005, 99-103.
89 This passage is likely the inspiration for Augustine’s use of the argument that if the objects of cognition are eternal then that in which they are cognized must also be eternal, as the basis for a proof of psychic immortality in De immortalitate animae 1.
see him elsewhere suggesting that even prior to entering human or animal form, the soul acquires a very light and fine body. In a later treatise, “On Problems of Soul” (Ennead IV.3-4), Plotinus claims that when souls leave the intelligible world, they first go to heaven and acquire there bodies, by means of which they then proceed “to more earthly bodies” (ἐπὶ τὰ γεωδέστερα σώματα, Ennead IV.3.15.1-4, cf. 9.3-12.). This is an early variant of the later Platonist theory of the so-called “soul-vehicle.” Extrapolating from various metaphorical passages in Plato’s dialogues in which the disembodied soul is said to ride in a “vehicle” (ὄχημα, cf. Phaedrus 247b and Timaeus 41e), this theory holds that the soul acquires some form of body prior to entering the human body proper.

Now at first glance the theory of the soul-vehicle might look like an attempt by the Platonists to preserve the soul’s incorporeality while circumventing the problems this posed for interaction between soul and body. Such an attempt would be clearly unsuccessful: like Descartes’ appeal to the pineal gland, it would only push this problem back to another level. But this was not in fact the main Platonist motivation. Plotinus seems to have been more concerned about the intrinsic suitability of different elements to receive soul: since earth is “less of a nature to partake of soul and far away from the bodiless” (IV.3.17.6-7), the soul-vehicle is needed to serve as a buffer. For Platonists after Plotinus, likewise committed to the incorporeality of the soul itself, the soul-vehicle provides a way to understand Socrates’ remarks about how the soul becomes “earthy” in the Affinity Argument (Phaedo 81c, cf. Republic 612a) and to explain how it can be purified from this condition, often through theurgic ritual—an aspect of the theory developed in greatest detail by the Syrian Platonist Iamblichus.

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90 On the origin of the soul-vehicle theory, see Dodds 1963, 313-321. As Dodds and others point out, the extrapolation is extravagant. Only the Phaedrus passage (where the ὄχημα is the chariot) seems at all amenable to the theory. In the Timaeus passage the ὄχημα is a star from which the soul would appear to depart while embodied; the same word is then used twice later in the dialogue to refer to the normal human body (44e, 69c). At Phaedo 113d, souls are mounted on ὄχημα to cross a river in the underworld. Plato does put a prima facie similar theory in the mouth of the Athenian Stranger in the Laws (898e-899a), but only as one possible explanation for how soul moves celestial, rather than human, bodies.

91 On Iamblichus and the soul-vehicle, see Finamore 1985, who also explores the significant variations between different versions of the Platonist theory.
Plotinus’s most illustrious student was Porphyry of Tyre. His work *Starting-Points to the Intelligibles*\(^\text{92}\) is a kind of epitome of Platonist doctrine in forty-four highly condensed theses, many of them quoting or paraphrasing the *Enneads*. In this work, the soul’s imperishability is closely linked to its lack of bodily qualities. The eighteenth thesis runs: “The soul is being without magnitude, without matter, incorruptible, possessing its being in life having life from itself.” The threefold negative characterization of the soul (ἀμεγέθης, ἄυλος, ἀφθαρτος) involves terminology entirely alien to Plato. Although Porphyry does not in this instance apply the term ἀσώματος to the soul, the central importance that he accorded to the acceptance of incorporeal entities can be seen from his very first thesis: “Every body is in place (ἐν τόπῳ), but none of the things incorporeal in themselves is as such in place.”

The formulation “things incorporeal in themselves” (τὰ καθ’ αὑτὰ ἀσώματα), which is also the subject of the next three theses, immediately shows Porphyry to have the Stoics in mind. The point of this expression is apparently to rule out the sort of incorporeal things that would be admitted by the Stoics, which, in contrast to Platonist incorporeals, do not really exist (cf. *Starting-Points* 19).\(^\text{93}\)

In his fourteenth thesis, Porphyry introduces a distinction between two ways in which something can be said to be “generated” (γενητὸν): either “through composition” (διὰ συνθέσεως) or “by depending on some cause” (τῷ ἀπ’ αἰτίου τινὸς ἀνηρτῆσθαι). Things generated in the first way are “dissoluble and therefore corruptible” (λυτὰ καὶ διὰ τοῦτο φθαρτά), in contrast to things that are “simple and incomposite,” which are “indissoluble and incorruptible.” Bodies are generated in both ways and thus are impermanent. But soul and intellect are generated only in the latter way (they emanate from the One, the highest metaphysical principle, depending on it as their cause). Soul is thus incomposite and incorruptible. This is Porphyry’s attempt to preserve what he takes to be the allegorical sense of

\(^{92}\)The work’s Greek title is Ἀφορμαί πρὸς τὰ νοητά. It is often referred to as the *Sentences*. Brison 2005 is an edition with commentary. On the immortality of the soul in Porphyry, cf. Pletsch 2005, 165-216.

\(^{93}\)Cf. Brison 2005, 383. Porphyry later interestingly suggests that the term “incorporeal” is in fact used “properly” (κυρίως) by the Stoics and “inappropriately” (καταχρηστικῶς) by the Platonists, in as much as the word ought to refer to the privation of body, which Platonist incorporeals are not naturally of such a sort to have in the first place (*Starting-Points* 42).
the craftsman’s creation of soul in the *Timaeus* (i.e. that soul is somehow generated rather than being ontologically basic) while answering the objection that anything generated must be corruptible.

Proving the soul’s incorporeality is also the main strategy for establishing its immortality in the *Elements of Theology* of Proclus. This work is structured as a cumulative series of propositions and proofs. Proposition 186 is: “All soul is bodiless being (ἀσώματος οὐσία) and separable from body.” The immediately following proposition is: “All soul is indestructible and incorruptible.” The latter proposition is proved by the argument Damascius attributes to Plotinus: anything that can be destroyed is either “bodily and composite” or “has its existence in an underlying thing,” i.e. is ontologically dependent on something else that can be destroyed. But soul is neither a body nor dependent on a body.

Proclus’s tactic for establishing the soul’s incorporeality, however, is somewhat different from those we have surveyed so far. He points out that the soul can know itself, and that what knows itself “turns upon itself” (πρὸς ἑαυτὸ ἐπιστρέφεται). This notion of ἐπιστροφή is of central importance in later Platonism. On the one hand, the term can denote a simple “turning” of attention to any object: thus Porphyry writes that “soul is bound to body because of its turning (τῇ ἐπιστροφῇ) towards the affections from body” (*Starting-Points* 7). But it also has a narrower, more intrinsically positive sense within the late Platonist metaphysics of emanation, referring to a “turning inwards” or “upwards,” whereby a thing becomes aware of and focused on its own nature or source. It is apparently the first, more neutral sense that is relevant earlier in the *Elements* when Proclus proves as a general principle that “everything that can turn upon itself is incorporeal” (15). This is because what turns towards something is “joined together” (συνάπτεται) with it; in the special case of turning towards oneself, this means that what turns and what is turned to actually “become one.” But this, Proclus claims, is not possible for anything with parts (τὰ

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94 On the history of the notion, see Gerson 1997.
95 Cf. Dodds 1963, 202-203, who notes the Stoic background to this usage.
μεριστά), including all bodies, since all of a thing’s spatially separated parts could not be joined with all of the rest at once. In making this point, Proclus, like Plotinus, is echoing Aristotle’s criticism of how soul is described in Plato’s *Timaeus*.

These examples show how the Platonists engage in creative philosophical manoeuvres (sometimes adopting Aristotle’s criticisms) in order to defend the idea that the soul is incorporeal and therefore immortal—a position that is, ironically, alien to Plato’s own texts. This interest in the incorporeality of the soul reflects a broader commitment to the existence of incorporeal substances as a critical point of difference between Platonism and Stoicism. It would be misleading, however, to compare the Stoics’ position in this debate to that of today’s advocates of “physicalism” or “materialism.” The Stoics, after all, taught the separate existence of soul and body in humans (even if both were, in some unusual sense, corporeal entities), as part of a richly theistic worldview, according to which god (indeed, a personal god, again in some perhaps unusual sense) pervades everything that is and guides it providentially. The Stoics were thus hardly godless materialists. Historically speaking, moreover, their school seems to have been dying out as a vibrant philosophical community by the time of Plotinus.\(^{97}\) Given this, it can be hard to understand what motivates the strident Platonist opposition to the Stoic view, beyond strong attachment to particular doctrinal points like the immortality of the soul\(^ {98}\).

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\(^{97}\) The latest Stoic philosopher from antiquity whose writings we possess is the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who died a quarter-century before Plotinus’s birth. Porphyry mentions some Stoic philosophers in his *Life of Plotinus* (20), but nothing is known of them.

\(^{98}\) Portions of this chapter were presented at a workshop at the University of Kentucky in March 2014. I am grateful to the organizers and the participants (especially my commentator, Sam Baker) for their stimulating questions and criticisms.
3 Immortality and the Tripartite Soul

Besides immortality, Plato’s most important teaching about the human soul, developed in greatest detail in the fourth book of the *Republic*, is that it has three distinct parts or aspects: one by which we learn and understand; one by which we feel anger, shame, and competitive impulses; and one by which we have appetites “for the pleasures of nourishment and intercourse and related things” (*Republic* 436a-b). Since antiquity there has been debate about how the doctrines of psychic immortality and tripartition are related: is the entire soul immortal, or just the highest part, the one associated with reason? Plato’s dialogues do not reflect a consistent position on this issue, and the efforts of modern scholars to either resolve the apparent conflicts or identify and arrange different views in a chronological order of development have not met with success.

This chapter will discuss several Platonic passages in which psychic immortality and tripartition are juxtaposed, as well as some later ancient texts that engage with them. My aim is not to resolve the traditional debate. Rather, I will argue that the debate’s formulation of the problem (which part or parts of the soul enjoy literal postmortem survival?) obscures what is really at stake in these passages, in which the immortality of the soul functions less as a doctrine about the afterlife than as a device for framing questions about what the human being is and how we ought to live. The main question at issue is: to what extent is reason constitutive of the human being? This question is first of all a descriptive one: given

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1For detailed studies of the theory, see Cooper 1984 and Lorenz 2006.
2Szlezák 1976, 58 concludes, after an exhaustive review of the prior literature, “daß es noch keine Interpretation gibt, die alle Zeugnisse der platonischen Seelenlehre zu einer systematischen Einheit zusammen- schließen kann, ohne dem einen oder dem anderen Text Gewalt anzutun.” Later references (as well as an ingenious attempt at resolution, to be criticized below) are found in Gerson 1987.
that human beings (in this life, at least) are clearly not constituted entirely from reason, can reason nonetheless be said to enjoy a special primacy within the soul, such that it above all else is human nature? If so, this descriptive claim can be used to ground a normative one: we ought to live in such a way that honors and enhances reason’s primacy, while subordinating or eliminating the other drives or elements now present in the soul.

Consider an “image of the soul in speech” from the ninth book of the Republic (588b-589b). Here Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine a many-headed monster, a lion, and a human being that have grown together into one being, which is then concealed through embodiment in the outward form of another human being. The three inner beings represent, respectively, the appetitive, spirited, and rational parts of the soul. This is obviously not a neutral psychological schema, but a starkly evaluative one with clear ethical implications: the just man, Socrates says, must speak and act so as to make “the human being inside the human being (τοῦ ἄνθρωπον ὁ ἐντὸς ἄνθρωπος) be most in control” (589a-b). According to this image, the apparently unified outer human being that speaks and acts is an illusion; the soul is really an unruly composite, with non-human, animal elements engaged in a struggle for control with the rational part, which is “the human being inside”—or, as Plotinus will later put it in a development of Plato’s image, “the true human being” (Ennead I.1.10).

Furthermore, as Socrates’ use of the third-person here suggests, this outer human being may not always identify with the “human being inside.” According to Plato’s Socrates and Plotinus, we can be profoundly alienated from who we, paradoxically, nonetheless really are.

How does this understanding of the soul and the human being relate to immortality? The image of the soul as a compound of monster, lion, and human being corresponds to the embodied soul as it is during our earthly lifetimes. If the lower soul parts are in fact a contingent, alien imposition due to embodiment, then the soul’s “natural” state would seem be a disembodied one in which the true human being exists on its own. Such a state

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3The Platonic idea seems to have been the indirect ancestor of the very different notion of the “inner human being” (ὁ ἐσω ἄνθρωπος) found in the Christian Pauline epistles (e.g. 2 Corinthians 4:16, Romans 7:22, Ephesians 3:16). On this connection see further Betz 2000.
can be *imagined* as the disembodied survival of the rational part of the soul on its own after death. Literal postmortem survival, however, is not actually necessary, given that even during this life the philosopher can (as Plato and the Platonists often urge) progressively separate himself from bodily concerns—hence Socrates’ famous dictum in the *Phaedo* that philosophy is “practice for death,” when this separation will be complete (64a). There is, in other words, a kind of (partial) disembodiment that is not postmortem.

A central claim of this chapter is that in Plato the immortality of the soul in the literal sense thus functions as a regulative fantasy, a mythical expression of an ethical directive for this life, couched in a temporal language drawn from cultic tradition. But regardless of this metaphorical function, does not Plato’s use of the term “immortal” (*ἀθάνατος*) inevitably also imply literal postmortem survival? Although Plato is admittedly not concerned to rigorously avoid this implication, another central claim of this chapter will be that Plato often employs the term “immortal” in a non-temporal sense as a synonym for “divine” (*θεῖος*), another adjective that he often applies to the soul. This is made possible by the close conceptual link between immortality and divinity in Greek thought—as in Homer, where the Olympian gods are constantly referred to as the “immortals.”

What does Plato mean when he calls the human soul divine? As we saw in the previous chapter (§ 2.1), Plato’s Socrates posits a special “relationship” (*συγγένεια*) between the human soul and the Forms, which are equated with what is immortal or divine. This ideal of total devotion during embodied life to philosophical activity, i.e. contemplation of the Forms, is conceived of by Plato and the Platonists as a kind of “becoming similar to god as much as possible” (*ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δύνατον*). This ideal suggests a way that human beings can become quasi-divine by living a life worthy of the gods, i.e. a life devoted to reason. This amounts to achieving immortality in a non-literal, non-temporal sense.

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4Cf. *Theaetetus* 176a-b. On this ideal of assimilation to god, cf. Sedley [1999](#) and Armstrong [2004](#); the latter argues that the ideal had different meanings for Plato and the later Platonists, with the latter identifying it more strongly with the transcendence of the body.
I have so far been summarizing one perspective prominent in Plato’s dialogues, one which was enthusiastically taken up and radicalized by the Platonists and which has often been taken as Plato’s position tout court. Later (pagan) Platonists, to be sure, go much further than Plato in claiming that the soul already enjoys or can actually achieve substantial unity with the divine; Plotinus, for instance, will insist that there is a sense in which we always *have* god in us (*Ennead* I.1.8). Plato, by contrast, speaks of the soul being divine merely in a qualified sense, by making gradual progress towards similarity or likeness to god to the (perhaps limited) extent that this is possible. (Note that in the *Republic* IX passage quoted above, Socrates speaks of the human being inside of us, not the god.) Plato is nonetheless often viewed alongside the Platonists, usually with a critical eye, as an advocate of “transcending humanity” in order to attain divinity as the highest ethical goal for human life⁵—against the consensus of earlier ethical reflection in Greece.⁶

Whatever we think of this ideal of approximating divinity through total devotion to reason, I will suggest that Plato actually does not embrace it as unambiguously or as uncritically as he is often believed to. First of all, one dialogue to be considered, the *Phaedrus*, disrupts the entire standard picture by offering a myth according to which non-rational elements are present in the soul even when disembodied and in fact are integral to a philosophical life. Furthermore, if we set aside the literal interpretation of immortality involving the soul’s disembodied postmortem survival, then if the soul’s nature is solely rational, the paradoxical result is that the soul never actually exists in its natural state. Plato’s use of terms related to “nature” (*φύσις*)—e.g. in the image of the tripartite soul from *Republic* IX, where Socrates says that the three parts are “naturally grown together” (*συμπεφυκυῖαι*, 588c-d)—often seems to deliberately force the question of whether there is not something arbitrary about privileging the rational part as the real human being. Why should rationality alone, rather

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⁶Homer, for instance, gives abundant hints that the Olympian life of *erhabener Unernst* would be an inappropriate, indeed undesirable existence for human beings (thus Odysseus turns down Calypso’s offer of immortality, preferring mortal finitude).
than the combination of rationality and irrationality characteristic of embodied life, have a
better claim to be called human nature?

Why, finally, does Plato not resolve these questions or even state them more directly?
The high degree of indeterminacy and ambiguity in Plato’s view of the soul is in part a result
of his frequent recourse to *images* in order to describe it. This is not merely a literary device:
 rather, it is both an expression of and a kind of solution to his skepticism about our ability
to know the soul’s nature. In my view, Plato’s position here is somewhat akin to the view of
Kant that the soul’s nature is inaccessible to introspective reflection. If this is right, then it
is not possible to make well-grounded descriptive claims about the soul’s nature in support
of a normative ideal. Images and myths stand on their own.

This chapter has six sections. The first three consider the central Platonic passages
relevant to the traditional debate about the immortality of the tripartite soul, from the
*Republic*, the *Timaeus*, and the *Phaedrus*, respectively. The fourth section gives a brief
survey of the controversy generated by these passages in the later ancient tradition. The
fifth section offers a more detailed analysis of Plotinus’s views on this issue, both in *Ennead*
IV.7, “On the Immortality of the Soul,” and in his later and more complex work, *Ennead*
I.1, “On What is the Living Being and What is the Human Being.” In the final section, I
briefly contrast the Platonist position with some contemporary ideas about selfhood.

### 3.1 Immortality and tripartition in *Republic* X (608c-612a)

Near the end of the tenth and final book of the *Republic*, Socrates offers an argument for
the immortality of the soul, apparently understood in a literal sense. He then employs a
complex image involving the sea-god Glaucus to resolve an apparent conflict between the

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7I will not here discuss the *Phaedo*, often taken as a further piece of conflicting evidence in this debate. The
doctrine of the tripartite soul is not openly presented in that dialogue, though some things that Socrates
says are suggestive of it (e.g. *Phaedo* 94d-e; cf. *Republic* 441b). I do not agree (for reasons too complex to
go into here) with the common view, held e.g. by [Bobonich, 2002, 28], that in the *Phaedo* “the body is itself
the proper subject of certain desires and passions.” At any rate, as my reading of the Affinity Argument in
the previous chapter has shown, Socrates in the *Phaedo* is plainly not committed to any view of the soul as
a partless or incomposite thing. So there is no obvious or blatant conflict to be resolved.
doctrines of psychic immortality and tripartition. The image is usually read as qualifying the earlier argument, such that what survives death is in fact only the soul’s rational part. I will argue that the image qualifies the argument in a different way, by pointing towards a non-literal notion of immortality. Socrates appears to be exhorting us to transcend the body and its concerns in favor of an identification with the divine in this life. But close attention to the context of this position within the Republic and to the traditions surrounding the figure of Glaucus in fact hint at a more ambivalent attitude towards the ideal of attaining immortality in this sense.

The idea of immortality is introduced in the Republic in the following way. Immediately after recommending the expulsion of imitative poetry from the ideal city on the grounds of its not being conducive to the development of virtue, Socrates abruptly announces that the importance of this decision cannot be fully appreciated, since the “greatest wages and prizes available for virtue” have not yet been discussed (608c). After all, he suggests, anything that could happen in the span of one human life seems insignificant when this is compared with the whole of time. “Have you not perceived,” he now asks Glaucon, “that our soul is immortal and is never destroyed?” (608d). Glaucon is amazed, but Socrates insists that giving an account of this is “nothing difficult” and proceeds to offer the following proof.

Every thing, Socrates proposes, has an “innate evil” (σύμφυτον κακόν) that can first of all corrupt and in some cases ultimately destroy it (608e-609a). The adjective “innate” (σύμφυτος) implies that the evil in question naturally originates out of and is indeed structurally inherent in the thing. Socrates’ examples of innate evils are fungus for grain, rot for wood, rust for metal, and disease for the body. (To understand the last example, recall that according to the scientific picture found for instance in the Timaeus, sickness is not caused by germs that come in from the outside; rather, sickness is the result of imbalances and malfunctions originating within the body.) As a practical criterion, the ability to corrupt a

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8 The best study of the argument is Brown 1997, to whom I will frequently refer in what follows. For another detailed examination of the passage, see Brill 2013, 139-153.

9 Brown 1997, 216 rightly stresses that “natural evils work on the inside, causing decay and weakening a thing’s constitution.”
thing, i.e. make it bad, as opposed to merely destroying it by bringing it to non-existence
(εἰς τὸ μὴ εἶναι, 609d2), is crucial to identifying a thing’s innate evil. Fire, for instance, can
destroy almost anything, but being burned up does not make wood “bad wood”—rather, rot
does. So rot, rather than fire, is the innate evil of wood. Nothing in the argument requires
that a thing have only one innate evil.

Socrates then puts forward a general principle: if the innate evil of a thing is not able to
destroy the thing, then the thing cannot be destroyed at all (609b). This cannot mean that
the innate evil of a thing must be at work for a thing to be destroyed, since this claim would
be vulnerable to many counterexamples, e.g. the case of fire and wood. The idea seems
rather to be that the innate evil or evils are in the best possible position to destroy a thing,
so that if they cannot destroy it, then a fortiori nothing else can.

This analysis is then applied to the soul. The innate evil of the soul is vice (609b-c), yet
the presence of vice in the soul does not seem to lead to death, understood as the separation
of soul and body (609d). Admittedly, a community can put a criminal to death because of
vice (609c), but they can do so only by harming the body. (This may lead to the separation
of soul and body, or even to the body’s total destruction, but it does not obviously destroy

10 A similar view to mine is offered by Brill 2013, 143: “an evil is naturally connected to something when it degrades the thing’s capacity to be what it is.” The argument here is thus connected to Plato’s version of the so-called ergon argument in Republic I (352d-353d). Unfortunately, the distinction between corruption and destruction, which is crucial to the argument, does not correspond to Plato’s use in this passage of διαφθείρειν (“corrupt”) and ἀπολλύειν (“destroy”), among other verbs of harming.

11 As Brown 1997, 215, 225 thinks. When Socrates later asks about the soul’s natural evil, Glaucon responds with four distinct items (609b10-11), namely the vices, which, at least on the theory of Republic IV, do not constitute a unity. Note also Socrates’ looseness at 609e2-3 about what the innate evil for grain is (“oldness or rottenness or whatever it is”), after having already said that it is fungus (609a1). Accepting that a thing could have multiple innate evils poses no problem for the argument: it must simply be shown that none of a thing’s innate evils can completely destroy it before the thing can be said to be indestructible.

12 Here I follow Brown 1997, 217-219, who rejects the interpretation whereby what he calls “the essential indestructibility claim” is a claim about causal necessity. This rejection might seem to fly in the face of what Socrates says at 610a5-8: “if the badness of body does not create badness of soul in the soul, then let us never think that the soul will be destroyed by an alien evil (ὑπὸ ἄλλωτρος κακοῦ) without its own badness (ἀνευ τῆς ἰδίας πονηρίας), one thing by another thing’s evil.” (Cf. similar language at 610b6-7.) But the ἰδίος/ἄλλωτρος contrast here refers not to the distinction between innate and non-innate evils, but rather to that between evils present in the thing itself vs. evils present in other things.

13 Artifacts are apparent counter-examples, however, if the innate evil is indeed to be defined as I suggest. For instance, what makes a knife a bad knife, namely dullness, does not completely destroy the knife. Perhaps artifacts are not supposed to have innate evils (all of Socrates’ examples are natural things).
the soul.) Since the soul cannot be destroyed by its innate evil, then by Socrates’ principle it cannot be destroyed at all and is thus immortal (610e-611a).

This is the only argument for the immortality of the soul in Plato that depends on the Socratic conception of the soul as the bearer of moral virtue and the subject of moral progress, as that in us “which becomes better with the just and is destroyed by the unjust” (Crito 47d). When asked what makes the soul bad, Glaucon refers to “the things we just now went through: injustice, intemperance, cowardice, and ignorance” (609b-c). Glaucon’s words suggest that the argument for immortality invokes in particular the analysis of the four cardinal virtues offered earlier in the Republic, which depended (especially for temperance and justice) on the model of the tripartite soul (427e-434e). It is precisely the fact that the soul is tripartite, including two inferior parts liable to conflict with reason, that makes vice its “innate evil,” i.e. its structurally inherent flaw.

It is thus surprising when Socrates suddenly suggests that the tripartite model does not in fact correspond to how the soul really is:

Socrates: [But let us not think that] the soul in its truest nature is of such a sort as to be full of variety and dissimilarity and difference in relation to itself.

Glaucon: What do you mean?

Socrates: It’s not easy for something to be eternal if it’s composite from many things without employing the finest composition, as the soul just now appeared to us.

Glaucon: It’s not likely, at least.

Socrates: But both the recent argument and others make it necessary that the soul is immortal. (611b)

Socrates here invokes a version of the Simplicity Principle familiar from the Affinity Argument in the Phaedo (cf. § 2.1), whereby composite things are liable to destruction. Since the Simplicity Principle is most plausibly applied to corporeal composites, Socrates’ application of it here to the soul suggests, perhaps unexpectedly, that tripartition involves the soul having spatially separable, corporeal parts. Relevant here is a passage in Book II of

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14So far in the Republic the doctrine of the tripartite soul has been presented primarily as a descriptive psychological theory about the “determinants of choice and voluntary action,” as Cooper 1984, 5 puts it, so that each aspect of the soul might be more appropriately termed an ἀρχή or δύναμις rather than a μέρος or
the Republic, where Socrates claims that “the most courageous and intelligent soul would least of all be troubled and altered (ἀλλοιώσειεν) by an external affection” (τι ἔξωθεν πάθος), then immediately follows this up with the observation that “all composite implements (τά γε σύνθετα πάντα σκεύη) and buildings and clothes that are made well and in a good condition by the same argument (κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον) are altered by time and other affections to the least extent” (381a). Here affections in the soul (e.g. fear) are explicitly compared to external shocks and stresses endured by corporeal artifacts.

Here in Book X, however, the Simplicity Principle is qualified in two ways: Socrates says that it is merely very difficult for a composite (σύνθετον) thing to be eternal (ἀίδιον), unless it is put together with the finest sort of composition (τῇ καλλίστῃ συνθέσει), in which case it might even be easy for it to survive (611b5-7). The human soul, at least “as it just now (νῦν) appeared to us” (a reference to Book IV, cf. 603d), does not enjoy this finest sort of composition, and thus does not meet even the relaxed standard for being eternal. But this does not mean that it is not immortal, since Socrates claims that the soul “in its truest nature” (τῇ ἀληθεστάτῃ φύσει) does not contain the kind of conflict that the tripartite model is meant to explain—that is, the soul is not really tripartite at all. In other words, having identified a conflict between psychic tripartition and immortality, Socrates sides with immortality, which has been made “necessary” by “both the recent argument and others.”

This is a very surprising result. After all, the argument for immortality seemed to presuppose the division of the soul as the explanation for the soul’s innate evil, vice. More seriously, were the detailed arguments for tripartition and the elaborate subsequent account of the virtues in the fourth book mistaken, resting on false data? Socrates seems to admit μόριον. In the arguments establishing the tripartition of the soul in the fourth book, Socrates never employs the language of composition (σύνθεσις) and only rarely that of “parts.” He usually refers to the three different things in the soul with the neutral term “forms” (εἴδη, at e.g. 435c-e) or no term at all (e.g. at 436a-b). He uses the term “part” (μέρος) only thrice (442b-c, 444b), and it may be that here he is only pressing the metaphor with the three classes in his ideal city, which he does often call “parts” (428e, 429b, 431e). Though the treatment of psychic conflict may make it inevitable that the soul has parts in some sense, perhaps, following Aristotle, we could speak of “parts” of the soul that are different or separable “in speech” (ἐν λόγῳ) but not in “place” or “magnitude.” Cf. De anima 413b13-29, 429a10-13, 432a19-22, 433b23-25. Likewise, in the Nicomachean Ethics (1102a28-32) Aristotle is willing to use a popular conception of the soul as having rational and irrational parts without committing to this picture from the perspective of natural science.
that this is so. “We must observe the soul as it is in truth,” he tells Glaucon, “not what sort of thing it is when mutilated by its partnership with the body and other evils, as we observe it now. Rather we must thoroughly observe through reasoning what sort of thing it is when it becomes pure” (611b-c). But he then immediately waivers and qualifies this discouraging result. It is at this point that he introduces the image of Glaucus:

“We have just now (νῦν) spoke about the soul truly, as to what sort of thing it appears to be at present. But we have observed it in a condition that’s like how those who see Glauclus in the sea wouldn’t easily see his ancient nature, because the old parts of his body have been partly washed away, partly worn down and in every way mutilated because of the waves, while other things have naturally grown on, shells and seaweed and stones, so that he is much more like a beast than what sort he was by nature. In the same way, we observe the soul in a state caused by countless evils.” (611c-d)

This complex image has traditionally been interpreted in the following way. The accretions on the body of the sea-dwelling Glauclus (the “shells and seaweed and stones”) represent either the lower two soul parts (appetite and spirit), or the characteristic states and desires of these two parts. These lower soul parts or drives, involving desires for nutrition, love, social status, etc., do not naturally belong in the soul, but are alien impositions from outside. The removal of these accretions would leave the soul unified enough (either literally incomposite, or nominally composite but without significant internal conflict or discord) that its eternality would not be threatened by the relaxed version of the Simplicity Principle, whereby it is easy for something using “the finest sort of composition” to be eternal.

The analysis of the soul in the fourth book was thus correct with respect to “what sort of thing it appears to be at present” (οἷον ἐν τῷ παρόντι φαίνεται), during embodied life. But this appearance is, in a way, deceptive; it is the disembodied, immortal soul, consisting of only or primarily the rational part, that shows the soul’s “true nature.” If we want evidence that this is so, then we should look, Socrates says:

15Again, a reference to Book IV, as at 611b6.
16For a lucid exposition, see Lorenz 2006, 38. See also Robinson 1995, 50-54.
17As Woolf 2012, 158 helpfully puts it, the lower soul parts or drives cannot even be on a par with the limbs of the body, which are not necessary for the body’s existence, but are indisputably natural growths, hardly alien impositions from the outside.
“...to the soul’s love of wisdom (εἰς τὴν φιλοσοφίαν αὐτῆς), and we should notice what things it grasps (ὡν ὑπτεται) and what kind of company it longs for, being related (συγγενῆς ἀδῷ) to the divine and immortal and what always is, and how it would be if it followed this in its entirety and was carried by this drive out of the sea in which it now is, and the stones and shells were scraped off (περικρουσθεῖσα) that now, since the soul has feasted on earth, have naturally grown around it in great number, earthy and stony and wild, because of those so-called happy feastings. And then one might see its true nature, whether multiform or uniform, and in what way or how. But as to its experiences and forms in human life, I think we’ve gone through this pretty well.” (611e-612a)

Paradoxically, Socrates is telling us about the soul’s “true nature” while simultaneously admitting that we cannot currently see what this true nature is. Embodiment so disfigures the soul that we can only imagine what the soul would be like if entirely devoted to philosophy—which now it is not, and perhaps cannot be. Since we cannot even tell, strictly speaking, if the true nature of the soul is “multiform or uniform” (εἴτε πολυειδὴς εἴτε μονοειδής) how could we possibly say whether the soul is immortal?

Echoes of the Affinity Argument in this passage are numerous. In comparing the human soul to Glaucus, Socrates emphasizes its “relationship” (συγγένεια) to the immortal—that is, its access to the Forms—rather than its actual immortality. When he invites us to imagine what sort of thing the soul would be if it was entirely devoted to philosophy and its accretions were “scraped off,” he is presumably talking about the purification of the soul through philosophy as a kind of achievement that we can aspire to during this life, not what inevitably happens to all souls at death. He shifts, in other words, from a concern with literal immortality (in the preceding argument) to a non-literal conception.

18Socrates’ terminology is carefully indeterminate. Since εἶδος is his most usual term for the “parts” of the soul, εἴτε πολυειδὴς εἴτε μονοειδής could mean “with many parts or just one.” Yet given that the two other appearances of the root πολυειδ- in the Republic apply to the appetitive part of the soul alone (580d, 590a), the contrast could also be between uniformity and a diversity other than that specifically due to tripartition. Alternatively, the sense found in the Affinity Argument in the Phaedo (78d) could be relevant: a thing that is μονοειδής never changes its looks or character (cf. Republic 381c).

19It is not even entirely clear how literal immortality would work, on the model proposed in this passage. Assuming that the soul is in some sense composite during this life, and that composite things are mortal, in principle the soul could become immortal in two ways, either (1) by having its parts more tightly bound together to form an integrated whole or (2) by shedding non-necessary accretions from an incomposite core. Both possibilities seem to be alluded to in this passage: (1) in the talk of the “finest sort of composition” at 611b, (2) in the talk of scraping off the accretions to reveal the immortal soul. But both possibilities have troubling implications. On (1), non-philosophical souls (that presumably don’t get more tightly bound
The point of the image of Glaucus would thus seem to be an ethical one, closely related to Socrates’ exhortation to philosophy as purification in the *Phaedo*. The “true nature” of the soul, of which its love of wisdom is a trace, is a normative ideal to which we should aspire in this life, even if we cannot fully attain it. While philosophical activity expresses our true nature, our other drives are unnatural and should be eliminated as much as possible. Although such a devaluation of the worldly concerns associated with the lower soul parts may seem like a typical thing for Socrates or Plato to say, this ethical message is nonetheless a surprising culmination for the *Republic*—a work that is, after all, dedicated to a presenting an ideal form of political and social organization. Consider the following three points of particular tension.

First, the entire notion of immortality of the soul was introduced to provide a further incentive in favor of the just life—specifically, in order to show the “greatest wages (*ἐπίχειρα*) and prizes (*ἀθλα*) available for virtue” (608c). Socrates returns to this theme after the conclusion of our passage, saying to Glaucon and Adeimantus that they now have shown that justice is best for the soul, without having yet “brought in the payments (*μισθούς*) and reputations (*δόξας*) of justice,” like the poets do (612a-b). Presumably the reference in both remarks is at least in part to the possibility of rewards in the afterlife (such as soon will be depicted in the myth of Er). As Brown notes, the nouns that Socrates chooses for the rewards reflect what typically appeals to the “money-loving” and “honor-loving” parts of the soul (cf. 580e-581b). But these are precisely the drives that apparently do not belong in

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the immortal soul at all. The psychology that emerges from the attempt to establish the soul’s immortality thus seems to subvert the main motivation for establishing it.

Second, as I have already pointed out, to deny that the soul is truly tripartite is to reject the analogy between city and soul that underpins the analysis of the virtues earlier in the *Republic*. Admittedly, that analysis will retain a provisional value for the soul as it is “in human life,” yet “human life” will be, strictly speaking, the soul’s unnatural condition. Socrates promises that when we observe the soul in its purity, we will “get a clearer insight into justices and injustices and all the things we’ve gone through just now” (611b). This promise recalls Socrates’ cryptic allusion in the fourth book to “another, longer road” leading to a more exact understanding of the soul and the virtues (435c-d). But what precisely this clearer and more exact understanding would amount to is obscure, especially if the virtues in question are to belong to a “purified” soul whose lower parts are absent or inactive. For it is hard to see what, in the absence of concerns due to embodiment and social life, virtues of character like justice or temperance could mean at all.

Third, the claim that the soul’s true nature is exhausted by its love of wisdom sits uneasily with how the rational part of the soul is portrayed in the rest of the *Republic*. Although Socrates does describe the rational part in Book IX as “loving learning and wisdom” (φιλομαθές...καὶ φιλόσοφον, 581b), this is in fact an incomplete account of its role. Socrates more often refers to it as “calculating” (λογιστικόν), evidently referring in the first instance to how it is responsible for means-end reasoning and issuing practical commands (for instance, in opposing certain desires of the appetitive part). Theoretical contemplation is thus not all that the highest part of the soul does: Socrates in fact “assigns to reason an inherent desire to perform the other part of its natural job, that of ruling.” The removal of the lower soul parts would deprive reason of a central part of its vocation, leaving it a government-in-exile.

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22 In response to Platonic passages like this one, later Platonists did develop complicated theories of higher, intellectual virtues that could be possessed and exercised in an entirely disembodied state. Cf. e.g. Plotinus, *Ennead* 1.2 and Cooper 2012, 341-363.
23 Cooper 1984, 6.
Socrates’ wording in fact seems to call attention to the gap between how the soul’s rational part is portrayed here and elsewhere in the Republic. In this passage in Book X, he says that if the soul “entirely followed” (πᾶσα ἐπισπομένη) the divine to which it is akin, then it would “leave the sea in which it now is,” i.e. the state of embodiment, and “scrape off” its encrustations (611e-612a). In Book IX, by contrast, he claimed that “when the whole soul follows the philosophical part (τῷ φιλοσόφῳ...ἐπομένης ἁπάσης τῆς ψυχῆς) and does not rebel, it belongs to each part in other respects to do its own work and be just, and indeed for each to reap the fruit of its own best and, as far as possible, truest pleasures” (586e-587a).

In this earlier text, for the soul to “follow” the rational part leads to harmonious stability in which all of the soul parts thrive in their own domain. These are two very different visions of the rule of reason in a human being.

Socrates’ exhortation to us to follow our soul’s “true nature,” expressed in its love of wisdom, is thus in tension with the social and political concerns of the rest of the Republic. Now it is of course true that this tension, between engaged concern with social and political organization in this world and the philosopher’s preference for caring only about the “model layed up in heaven” (592b), runs throughout the entire work. But the tension between two incompatible visions of human nature seems particularly serious here. What is the point of insisting that a certain conception of human nature is the true one, while at the same time admitting that it is not the one operative in normal human socio-political life?

Let us examine more closely Socrates’ use of the vocabulary of nature. As we have seen, in presenting the image of Glaucus, he speaks of the soul’s “true nature” and even its “truest nature.” This is an odd phrase: “true nature” and variants thereof are basically unparalleled in Greek literature outside of this passage in the Republic. It is not hard to see why: in early Greek thought, “nature” often denotes the underlying essence or structure of things.

A thing’s nature can be hidden or non-apparent, but it is never false. To speak of a “true”

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24 Cf. e.g. Homer, Odyssey X.302-303 and Heraclitus, fr. 123 Diels-Kranz. On the early history of the concept of φύσις, see Heinimann [1945], 89-109. Heinimann rightly emphasizes that the word can also retain its more dynamic, etymologically original sense of “growth” or “becoming” (cf. the range of meanings given in Aristotle, Metaphysics Δ.4).
or “truest” nature, as Socrates does, is thus at best a pleonasm, at worst nonsensical, in as much as there can be no such thing as a “false” nature.

Within the frame of the image of Glaucus, Socrates also speaks of the sea-dweller’s “ancient nature” (ἀρχαῖα φύσις, 611d2) and of “what sort he was by nature” (οἷος ἦν φύσει, 611d5-6). The comparison puts a temporal spin on the “true nature” by identifying it with what was actual in the past. This phrase ἀρχαῖα φύσις is often found Greek medical texts, where it refers to the healthy condition of a patient before the onset of a disease. The task of the physician, in this context, is to “restore the ancient nature.” Taken in isolation, the phrase implies a different way of thinking about the nature of the thing, whereby it is something that can change and evolve. The patient’s “ancient nature” was healthy, the patient’s “present nature” is sick. Here, “nature” alone is a descriptive rather than a normative term, referring to the reality at a given time rather than to a timeless or original ideal standard.

There are hints of a similar conception of nature as changeable in the passage from the Republic. In speaking of how the accretions on Glaucus and the soul come to be (the shells, seaweed, and stones representing the lower soul parts or their drives), Socrates employs compound forms from the verb φύειν (“to grow”), cognate with φύσις (“nature”): notice “grown on” (προσπεφυκέναι, 611d4) and “grown around” (περιπέφυκεν, 612a2). This suggests that the accretions due to embodiment are not an unnatural, external imposition. Human nature is not covered over and obscured, but actually changed. So the embodied condition of the soul, in which soul is liable to internal conflict and vice, is also in a way a natural state. Such doubleness in human nature obviously complicates appeals to nature as a normative standard. If the soul’s nature can evolve, or if the soul has at least two different natural states, why privilege the disembodied condition over the embodied one as the true nature?

Plato could retreat to the bare assertion (without any appeal to nature as a justification) that the disembodied, rational condition is simply better. Perhaps our embodied condition

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25Hesychius defines the phrase as ἡ πρὸ τοῦ νοσεῖν κατάστασις (7572), as it used at Hippocrates, Epidemics II.1.6 (and elsewhere in the Hippocratic corpus) and Aeschylus, Libation Bearers 281. Cf. Plato, Gorgias 518c (τὰς ἀρχαίας σάρκας).
is natural in some sense, but nonetheless our rational nature reflects what we should aspire to become entirely like. But things are not so simple. Consider first an interesting counterpoint to this “Platonic” view that itself comes from elsewhere in Plato, from the speech of Aristophanes in the Symposium. Here Plato’s Aristophanes explains the origin of erotic love using a myth of how human beings were originally joined in pairs before they were split into two as a punishment for challenging the gods. Erotic love is a longing to return to this this state of primeval wholeness. Aristophanes refers four times to this original circular condition as our “ancient nature” (191d, 192e, 193c-d).

More explicitly than Plato’s Socrates in the Republic, Plato’s Aristophanes relies on a contrast between our present condition and an alleged past one. But here the appeal to our ridiculous “ancient nature”—which has nothing to do with rationality or philosophy—implies neither a serious historical theory, nor an ideal that we can actually achieve. In Aristophanes’ story, humans have been so irrevocably transformed that there is no way for them to really return their original state. Sex may be directed towards the fantasy of union, but attempts to actually bring this about are futile. In fact, Aristophanes says, early attempts by humans to restore their ancient nature by embracing their other half and desiring to “grow together” (συμφῦναι) led to their death due to neglect of bodily concerns like eating (191a-b). I do not have space here to explore the complex irony of Aristophanes’ speech, or what attitude Plato is taking to the views there expressed. This cautionary strain, whereby a return to our “ancient nature” is in fact a dubious, even perilous objective, is also found in the Republic. In the rest of this section, I will substantiate this claim by examining the mythological tradition about Glaucus outside of Plato.

Socrates says very little about who or what Glaucus is, referring to him only as “Glaucus in the sea” (ὁ θαλάττιος Γλαῦκος), apparently assuming that his audience will be familiar with his story. We today must rely on scattered references in various, mostly later sources. Pausanias, the periegete from the second century CE, tells us the following in his account of the town of Anthedon in Boeotia:
By the sea there is what is called the “Leap of Glauclus.” They say Glauclus was a fisherman, but after he ate some grass he became a god (δαίμονα) in the sea and to this day foretells to humans the things to come. … Pindar and Aeschylus learned about this from the people in Anthedon; Pindar didn’t say very much about it in his poems, but for Aeschylus it was enough to write a play. (IX.22.6-7)

The play by Aeschylus, the Glaucus Pontius, is lost. Surviving fragments allude to how Glauclus ate some “everliving, undecaying grass” (τὴν ἀείζων ἄφθιτον πόαν) which made him immortal, after which he was apparently regarded with horror by his former fellow humans, who saw him as a “beast in human form” (ἀνθρωποειδὲς θηρίον), probably because he was covered in “mussels, barnacles, and shells” (κόγχοι, μύες κὤστρεια) due to living in the sea. Now the Glaucus Pontius was probably not a tragedy but a satyr-play. It probably emphasized the humorous aspect of Glauclus’s pathetic predicament as a god whose disgusting appearance led to his divinity being chronically misunderstood. If, as seems likely, Plato in the Republic had this text of Aeschylus in mind, he is thus invoking a comic figure.

The point that Socrates’s image shares with the traditional story is this: when people see Glauclus emerge from the sea, he appears to be a monster or beast, because he is covered with sea-debris, but in fact he is immortal. Beyond this, however, there is an important divergence between Socrates and the tradition. For Socrates, Glauclus is himself immortal and akin to divine, qualities that are merely obscured by marine accretions; likewise the human soul was originally something god-like but took on mortal qualities due to embodiment. In the myth, the situation is just the reverse: Glauclus was a mortal who became immortal and divine. His fundamental, “ancient nature” was therefore mortal. Socrates thus apparently alters the traditional story, making Glauclus’s “ancient nature” divine in order to align it with our soul’s “true nature,” an ideal to which we are to aspire.

26Aeschylus, Glaucus Pontius, fr. 28, 26, and 34 Radt.
27The arguments for considering the work a satyr-play rather than an ordinary tragedy are presented, along with all extent fragments, in Krumeich et al. 1999, 125-130. A crucial point is the appearance in the fragments of the non-tragic diminutive θηρίον in place of the more elevated θηρίον.
28As Woolf 2012, 152.
29As Clay 1985, 235 puts it, although Socrates makes Glauclus “an image of the soul imprisoned and disfigured by its association with the body,” the sea-dweller can also be taken as “an emblem for transcending the mortal.” Clay’s study is the best to date on the figure of Glauclus, but his main concern is with the reference
There is more. One feature emphasized in many of our sources is that Glaucus’s transition to immortality was not a happy one. In fact he seems to have come to regret his transformation into an undying god. In addition to the possible comic aspects of Aeschylus’s satyr-play, the scholion on Republic 611d—admittedly a confused amalgam of various different traditions—reports that Glaucus “laments his immortality” (ὁλοφύρεται τὴν ἀθανασίαν) to sailors (in his native Aeolic dialect, no less). A reason for this lamentation is suggested by another scholion about Glaucus, this time on Euripides’s Orestes (364), according to which when Glaucus ate the magic grass he became “immortal, but not ageless (ἀθάνατος, ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἀγήραος), upon which he threw himself into the sea.” Both scholia suggest that Glaucus’s leap into the sea was a quasi-suicide, a desperate expression of alienation from humanity. The detail of his being “immortal but not ageless” moreover recalls the better-known myth of Tithonus, the mortal man taken by the goddess of the dawn as a husband. His youth disappears, but he lives on, increasingly decrepit. The myth of Glaucus looks like it too was a cautionary tale of this type, warning mortals not to aspire to a higher situation.

In the Hellenistic period, this tragic aspect was rendered more poignant through the addition of a romantic twist: many works now lost told of Glaucus’s unreciprocated longing for various women and nymphs after his transformation. This tradition lies behind a humorous episode in the thirteenth book of Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Here Glaucus has fallen in love with the nymph Scylla, who rejects his attempts to explain his fluid and confusing ontological status. “I am no monster nor wild beast (fera belva), lady, but a god of the water (deus aquae)!” he protests. “Earlier I was mortal (ante tamen mortalis eram), but destined, apparently, for the deep seas” (917-921). He describes how after eating the magic plant he felt his breast seized “with the love of another nature” (alterius naturae amore, 946) and how he acquired his impressive beard, hair, and fins. “But what good is this appearance,”

30 Athenaeus in the Deipnosophistae (VII.296a-297b = VII.45-48 Kaibel) quotes a large number of poets presenting variations on the basic story.
he moans to Scylla, “what good is it to have pleased the gods of the sea, what good is it to
be a god (quid iuvat esse deum), if you are not touched by these things?” (964-965).

Granted a miraculous knowledge of the future but cut off from attachments to other
human beings, Glaucus becomes, as it were, either a beast or a god, but no longer a human
being. In this light, Socrates’ use of the story of Glaucus in the Republic in order to provide
an image of the nature of the human soul looks rather different. Socrates appears to be
making an exhortation to us to transcend our embodied social existence through devotion to
philosophy. But this message would have been subtly undermined, for Plato’s contemporary
readers, by the mythological tradition behind the image of the sea-god, the original point of
which was precisely to warn mortals against such immortal aspirations.

3.2 Immortality in the Timaeus (69c-73a, 90b-c)

At first glance, Timaeus seems to offer a much more straightforward answer than Socrates
in the Republic to the question of which aspects of the soul are immortal: he explicitly
distinguishes between an immortal and a mortal element in human souls, each with a clearly
defined role. But this simplicity is deceptive. In this section I will argue that in fact literal
immortality has little to no importance to the vision of the human condition found in the
Timaeus. More clearly than anywhere else in the Platonic corpus, here the term “immortal”
can be seen to be used in a non-temporal sense as a synonym for “divine.” The traditional
question about which aspects of the tripartite soul survive death thus has no sense when
applied to the Timaeus.

In the previous chapter (§2.3), we left off Timaeus’s story at the point when the gods place
the “immortal principle of the mortal animal” (ἀθάνατον ἀρχὴν θνητοῦ ζῴου) into human
bodies (42e-43a). The description of this process is resumed much later in Timaeus’s speech,
when the gods, having received from the Demiurge the “immortal principle of soul” (ἀρχὴν
ψυχῆς ἀθάνατον) and placed it in the mortal body, proceed to also settle there “another form
(eἶδος) of soul, the mortal one (τὸ θνητὸν), having in it terrible but necessary affections” (69c-
d). These affections (παθήματα) are pleasure, pain, confidence, fear, spirit, hope, perception, and erotic love. The gods fear that the proximity of these affections will “defile the divine” (μιαίνειν τὸ θείον), i.e. the immortal soul located in the head; they therefore settle the mortal soul in the torso, with the neck serving as a bridge (69d-e).

Since the mortal soul has two parts, one better, one worse, the gods use the midriff to divide the torso into two compartments, compared to the male and female quarters within a Greek house (69e-70a). The better part of the mortal soul, “partaking in courage and spirit, being a lover of victory,” is placed in the upper compartment, in the chest, where it is well situated not only to receive commands from reason in the head, but also to rouse the entire body to action through the heart, which can in turn be cooled and relaxed by the lungs (70a-d). The worse part, “appetitive (ἐπιθυμητικόν) of food and drink and whatever things it needs on account of the body’s nature,” is placed in the abdomen, near the digestive system; there the gods “tie it down like a wild creature, but one necessary to nourish along with the others if any mortal race was ever to be” (70d-e). The appetitive part does not obey reason directly, but is guided by images projected by reason on the liver (71a-72b).

Timaeus’s soul thus has three parts, which correspond quite closely in role to those in the Republic. The distinctive addition of the Timaeus is the detailed elaboration of the soul’s spatiality and the mortal parts’ relationship to the physiology of the body. This elaboration provides an opportunity to emphasize the benevolent providence of the gods in their arrangement of the soul parts, such that reason can remain in control, while the mortal soul exercises functions that are indispensable for the existence of a human being. Although embodiment is still seen as ultimately a necessary evil, and the lower soul parts are still portrayed negatively, the addition of the mortal soul, as Johansen argues, is more than a mere concession to brute necessity.31

The precise nature of the mortal soul, however, is left unspecified, as its actual construction (in contrast to that of the immortal soul) is not described at all. Karfik tentatively

31 Johansen 2004, 147-149.
holds that the mortal soul actually has “no substance of its own,” so that its parts are merely “specific movements of specific tissues.”  

32 Indeed, in what follows Timaeus does attempt to explain the phenomena of biological life, such as respiration, in a mechanistic way that seems to obviate the need for the psukhe as a separate life-force. If this view is correct, then the two lower soul parts are very literally mortal: they are closely connected to the mortal body and depend on it for their existence. 

33 Is the immortal soul then immortal in an equally literal sense? Certainly not in an unqualified way: as we saw, even the gods (i.e. the stars) in Timaeus’s story are “not entirely immortal,” being in principle liable to dissolution, although the goodness of the demiurge protects them from this fate (41a-b). No such guarantee of protection is extended to the “immortal” human soul, which, as we have seen, is a composite, quasi-corporeal thing, and thus likewise in principle dissoluble. Although it is possible that it too will enjoy permanent survival due to the craftsman’s benevolence, we should not assume this without explicit textual evidence. After all, in the case of the gods, their preservation has an axiological ground: the craftsman will not destroy them because “it would be evil to want to dissolve what is beautifully fitted together and in a good condition” (41b). But the immortal soul in humans is explicitly said to be less pure than the cosmic soul (41d). Perhaps this imperfection, the nature of which is left vague, means that the craftsman would have less scruples about destroying them or letting them go out of existence.

That humans are in some basic sense mortal is clear from the Demiurge’s initial explanation to the lesser gods of why and how humans must be created:

“The three mortal kinds (θνητὰ γένη) have not yet been produced. If these do not come to be, the universe will be incomplete. For it will not have in itself all the kinds of animals—but it must, if it is going to be sufficiently complete. But if these things came to be and partook of life (βίου μετασχόντα) through me, they would be equals to the gods. So that they may be mortal and the whole may be truly a whole, you take up the crafting of animals, according to your nature, imitating my power and

33 Robinson 1990 argues that the mortal parts of the soul may in fact be everlasting; Mason 1994 refutes this view. Both authors, however, assume that some kind of everlasting existence for the human soul is at play in the Timaeus, which is what I here wish to dispute.
your own coming-to-be. The aspect of them that deserves to share the name of the immortals (καθ᾽ ὅσον μὲν αὐτῶν ἀθανάτοις ὁμώνυμοι εἶναι προσήκει), being called divine (θεῖον λεγόμενον) and guiding those among them who are always willing to follow justice and you, this I myself will begin by sowing and then hand over to you.” (41b-d)

Although humans are mortal, they nonetheless have an element in them that “shares the name of the immortals” (ἀθανάτοις ὁμώνυμοι). This precise formulation is significant, as it leaves open the possibility that gods and the relevant element in human souls are both called “immortal” only by equivocation (ὁμωνύμως, in Aristotle’s terminology). In other words, the immortal human soul may be immortal in a different sense than the gods are.

What would this different sense be? Twice we have already seen the immortal soul described as “divine” (41c, 69d). Indeed, Timaeus sums up his later account of the soul in the following way (showing striking reserve about the truth-status of the picture he has presented):

“Concerning the soul, what of it is mortal and what divine (ὁσον θνητὸν ἔχει καὶ ὁσον θεῖον), and how and with what and on account of what they were settled separately, only if a god agreed could we then affirm that what has been said is true. But that what we have said is likely (εἰκός) we must risk saying both now and as we continue our investigation, so let it be said.” (72d)

Here Timaeus is apparently taking “divine” and “immortal” to be synonyms, either of which can be opposed to “mortal.” These passages raise the possibility that he is not (or at least not primarily) using the terms θνητός and immortal ἀθανάτος to pick out the contrast between what is subject to death and what is temporally everlasting. Rather, he is contrasting what is involved with lower, earthly concerns (i.e. the “mortal”) with what is “equal to the gods” in enjoying a life of divine or godlike activities (i.e. the “immortal”). When the Demiurge says that if he created humans in their entirety they would “be equals to the gods” (θεοῖς ἰσάζοιτ’ ἄν, 41c), he does not mean that he would be unable to give them only a finite lifespan (this would obviously be within his power). Rather, he means that their existence would be entirely blessed and unconcerned with mortal matters.

Let me sum up my terminological point. To be “entirely immortal” would be to enjoy an existence that is both blessed and everlasting in a non-contingent way, i.e. with no poten-
tial for destruction. The cosmic craftsman in the *Timaeus* enjoys this kind of immortality (cf. 37a), but nothing else in the dialogue does. Instead, at least two derivative forms of immortality are in play. First, the gods are immortal in the sense that they are blessed and *de facto* everlasting, while remaining potentially destructible. Second, part of the human soul is immortal in the still weaker sense that its existence can be blessed and godlike. It is not guaranteed (at least explicitly) to be everlasting at all. In this latter sense, “immortal” indicates merely the possibility of quasi-divine blessedness.

That Timaeus is speaking of mortality and immortality in such a non-temporal sense with regard to the human soul would seem to be confirmed by a later passage in his concluding remarks on education. Here he instructs us “to think of the most sovereign form of soul in us in this way, that the god gave it to each of us as a divinity” (δαίμονα, 90a). The rational part of the soul is thus emphatically not the “mind” that we inhabit on a daily basis. He continues:

“For the one who has busied himself with his appetites or love of victory and labored much over these things, necessarily all his opinings will come to be in him as mortal (θνητά), and as much as it is possible to become entirely mortal, he will not even slightly fall short of this, since he has cultivated this sort of thing. But for the one who has been serious about the love of learning and true cogitations and who has exercised these parts of himself the most, I suppose there is every necessity that he think things immortal and divine (ἀθάνατα καὶ θεία), if indeed he grasps truth, and to the extent that human nature admits of participating in immortality (καθ᾽ ὅσον δ᾽ αὖ μετασχεῖν ἀνθρωπίας ἐνδέχεται), he will in no way fall short of this, and since he is always serving the divine and keeps the divinity (δαίμων) dwelling within him well-adorned, he will be especially happy (εὐδαίμων).” (90b-c)

Participation in immortality is here presented not as an automatic certainty but as something achieved or earned through the right kind of intellectual activity. In a way that is reminiscent of the notion of ἰμοίωσις θείω in the *Theaetetus*, humans become immortal in as much as they think immortal thoughts. As Timaeus says next, we must strengthen in our souls “the motions that are related to the divine” (θείω συγγενεῖσ), which are in fact “the thoughts and

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34 The use of δαίμων here may signal the influence on Timaeus of Empedocles, who sometimes seems to use δαίμων as his term for the human soul. Cf. fr. 115 Diels-Kranz in its context in Hippolytus, *Refutation of all heresies* VII.29.
revolutions of the universe”—he here appeals to the isomorphism of the circular motions in the soul with those of the cosmos—while correcting those “corrupted cycles in our head concerned with becoming” (90c-d). We should “assimilate (ἐξομοιῶσαι) what apprehends to what is apprehended”—the soul to the cosmos—“according to our ancient nature” (κατὰ τὴν ἄρχαιαν φύσιν, 90d). All this, however, is presented as possible for human beings only to some limited extent: the business of assimilating oneself to the divine is evidently in competition with other, mortal concerns.

Timaeus is making the point that practicing philosophy leads to a happy (εὐδαίμων) existence now. He adds, it is true, that assimilating the motions of our immortal soul to those of the cosmos will bring us the best life “both for the present and for the future time” (90d), but this allusion to the afterlife is vague and colorless. Similar is his account of natural death: “Finally, when the bonds of the triangles fitted together around the marrow no longer hold up, being pulled apart by their toil, they release the bonds of the soul, and the soul, being naturally released, flies off (ἐξέπτατο) with pleasure” (81d-e). The detail that the soul “flies off” seems like merely a superficial concession to the traditional Homeric picture of death, which is not easily squared with how the soul is described in the rest of the dialogue. Timaeus mentions Hades only once, in passing (44c); in another passage he says that a soul that has lived justly will return to a dwelling in the stars and have a happy life there, while an unjust soul will be reincarnated first as a woman, later as a wild animal (42b-c).

This brings us to a more serious objection against a non-temporal interpretation of immortality: does not what Timaeus says about reincarnation require the postmortem survival of the individual soul? I think not, as can be shown by a brief survey of the three passages in which Timaeus alludes to reincarnation. The first I have just mentioned. In the second, the fact that women and wild animals will one day come to be from men is invoked en passant to explain the creation of nails (76d-e). The third, an explanation of the origin of non-human

\[\text{35}^\text{I here adopt the translation of περὶ τὴν γένεσιν at 90d2 proposed by Sedley 1999, 323, as opposed to the usual rendering “around the time of birth.” Nonetheless the participle διεφθαρμένας must be back a back-reference to the description of embodiment and birth at 43a-44a.}\]
animals, is offered by Timaeus only reluctantly, as a kind of afterthought (90e-91e). The first humans were apparently all male, but cowardly or unjust men “were transformed into the nature of women in the second birth” (γυναῖκες μεταφύοντο ἐν τῇ δευτέρᾳ γενέσει), after which the gods created sexual love, ostensibly to allow for further propagation of the species (90e-91a). The animals of the air, land, and sea are also apparently descended from male human beings with various intellectual failings (91d-92b). Birds, for instance, come from empiricist astronomers: “non-vicious but vacuous men who studied the heavens, but on account of simplemindedness considered that the most secure proofs about these things came through sight” (91d-e).

Many of the details here cannot be seriously intended. (I do not thereby mean to dismiss the obvious sexism of these passages, which stands whether we interpret them literally or not.) Notice that Timaeus simultaneously seems to hint at a physiological mechanism for explaining how the immortal form of soul is passed down from one generation to another by reproduction rather than reincarnation: male semen descends down the spine to the genitalia from its source in the brain, the location of the immortal soul (91a-b). Yet reincarnation is not superfluous; it functions as Timaeus’s sole device for explaining the creation of women and beasts. He otherwise offers no account of the origin of human sexual difference and reproduction or of the non-human animals whose presence is necessary to fill out the visible cosmos as a complete image of its intelligible model (cf. 30c-31a, 41b).

The role of the doctrine of reincarnation in the *Timaeus* is thus puzzling and not obviously coherent. It seems at least possible that Timaeus uses the notion of the reincarnation of the soul in the “second birth” as a narrative representation of a state of affairs that in fact did not come to be through a temporal process. According to Aristotle, some members of the Old Academy, apparently Speusippus and Xenocrates, wanted to interpret the dialogue’s narrative account of the creation of the cosmos as a mere expository device.

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36 So [Cornford 1937, 291: “we are not to suppose that there ever existed a generation of men before there were any women or lower animals.”]
“for the sake of teaching.”

If this view is right, then in the *Timaeus* reincarnation *is* strictly speaking superfluous: men, women, and non-human animals all existed from eternity. A more restricted non-literal reading is also possible: the cosmos as a whole was created, but all the living beings were actually created simultaneously. In support of this one might note that Timaeus already claims that “human nature is double,” i.e. gendered, at the moment of the creation of the immortal soul (42a). Reincarnation would on this view offer Timaeus, at the cost of a local temporalizing distortion, an opportunity to work into his story a popular belief (from his home region in Italy) concerning postmortem rewards and punishments. The creation of women and non-rational animals, which might seem in tension with his teleology and stress on the goodness of the cosmic craftsman, can moreover then be presented as a by-product of divine justice.

My aim, in any case, is not to explain away every detail in Timaeus’s account that suggests a belief the literal postmortem survival of the individual human soul. My argument is rather that Timaeus *need* have no real commitment to this, and that his distinction between the immortal and mortal soul in human beings is most fruitfully understood in a transferred sense. The two types of soul represent a division of labor within the human being: the mortal parts attend to the necessities of life, supporting and guided by the immortal part, which strives to harmonize itself with the divine order of the cosmos—a striving itself worthy of being called divine.

A claim quite similar to that of Timaeus, though without the appeal to the cosmic order, is made by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7, in his discussion of the contemplative life.

It is worth quoting the passage at some length:

> Such a life will be above what is human (κρείττων ἢ κατ’ ἄνθρωπον), for such a man will live such a life not *qua* human being but *qua* what is divine (θεῖον) within him. By as much as this [divine] thing differs from the composite (τοῦ συνθέτου), by so much is its activity superior to activity in accord with the rest of virtue. And if intellect (νοῦς) is divine in relation to the human being, so the life in accord with intellect is

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37 *De caelo* I.10, 279b32-280a2. Broadie 2012, 243-277 deals at length with this broader interpretive issue.
38 The relevance of the *Timaeus* to this passage has long been noticed, e.g. by Cornford 1937, 354-355. For discussion see Sedley 1999, 324-328.
divine in relation to human life. We should not follow the advice to think human things (ἀνθρώπων φρονεῖν) since we are human, or mortal ones since we are mortal, but rather as much as we can take the immortal side (ἐφ’ ὅσον ἐνδέχεται ἀθανατίζειν) and do everything to live in accord with what is best in us. ... This also would seem to be each man himself, since it is what is sovereign and better. It would be strange, if he would not choose to live his own life, but that of something else. This is in tune with what was said before, that what is each one’s own is naturally best and most pleasant for each. For the human being this is life according to intellect—if this is indeed most of all the human being. So this will be the happiest (εὐδαιμονέστατος) life.

(1177b26-1178a8)

In agreement with Timaeus, Aristotle claims that living in accord with what is immortal and divine in us is the route to a happy life now. Aristotle does not think that everlasting existence is in any sense possible for human beings. In Book X, Aristotle is thus not advising us to aspire to literally eternal life, but rather to a kind of life worthy of the gods. (This position may be in some tension with Aristotle’s project elsewhere in the Ethics, namely to explore and articulate a conception of a specifically human kind of good anchored in the social and political community.)

Aristotle’s text hints at the cultural background against which we can appreciate the novelty of the position presented by Timaeus. The proverbial warning to “think mortal thoughts,” referred to and criticized by Aristotle, is common in earlier Greek literature, usually with the implication that the gods will punish those who do not. Thus the chorus in the Bacchae of Euripides sings, as a warning to Pentheus not to oppose Dionysus, that “to not think mortal things (τό μὴ θνατὰ φρονεῖν) means a short life” (397). Similarly Pindar, after recounting how Asclepius was killed by Zeus for bringing someone back from the dead, advises that:

We must seek from the divinities what is suitable for our mortal minds (θναταῖς φρασίν), recognizing what is before our feet, what sort of fate we have. Do not, dear soul, strive

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39The only other reference to immortality in the Nicomachean Ethics occurs when Aristotle uses it (presumably in the literal meaning of the word) as an example of an impossible object of wish (1111b22-23). In the De anima (415a23-b7), Aristotle furthermore says that reproduction is “most natural” for all living things (including animals and plants), so that they can “participate in what is always and what is divine in the way that they can” (τοῦ ἀεὶ καὶ τοῦ θείου μετέχωσιν ἥ δύνανται). It is not however possible for them to do this “by means of continuous existence (τῇ συνεχείᾳ), since none of the corruptible things can remain the same and one in number.”
after immortal life (βίον ἀθάνατον), but use to the full every device within your power. 
(Pythian III.59-62)

Plato’s own Symposium also gives voice to this earlier position, again in the speech of Aristophanes. “They had great thoughts (φρονήματα μεγάλα),” Aristophanes says of the old, circular human beings, “and they made an attempt upon the gods” (190b). Because of this arrogance, the humans lost their “ancient nature”—precisely what, according to Timaeus, thinking divine thoughts will allow mortals to regain.

3.3 The immortal soul in the Phaedrus (245b-257b)

Timaeus and (at least to some extent) Socrates in the Republic both celebrate the primacy of reason in the human being. The picture presented by Socrates in the Phaedrus is very different. Here, in a long speech known as the Palinode (244a-257b), Socrates undertakes to defend the idea that madness (μανία), especially the madness of erotic love (ἔρως), is itself divine, a gift from the gods, and the source of the greatest goods for humanity. This is the most explicitly and elaborately mythical of the texts to be considered in this chapter, the source of images with enduring resonance in the Western literary tradition. Strikingly, it suggests that non-rational aspects of soul are also immortal.

In order to appreciate the goodness of erotic madness, Socrates says, we must first come to understand “the nature of soul, both divine and human, seeing its affections and deeds” (245c). This section of the speech begins with a dense and somewhat confusing proof of the soul’s immortality (245c-246a), composed in a technical style that stands out as unusual in its poetic context. The proof is based on the soul’s constant self-motion. Socrates starts by setting out the demonstrandum, that “all soul is immortal” (ψυχὴ πᾶσα ἀθάνατος, 245c5),

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40 Yunis 2011, 136, following others, says that it “recalls the gnomic, oracular qualities of fifth-century Ionian philosophical prose,” noting in particular the frequent omission of the article and the repetition of key terms. This has led some to question its role in the dialogue. Bett 1986, 2 holds that “Plato intends the argument as a rigorous proof...is not, I think, in doubt,” but in their treatments of the argument Griswold 1986 and Ferrari 1987 do doubt it. Plato is often said (by modern scholars—I know of no ancient suggestion to this effect) to be indebted here to an argument of the pre-Socratic Alcmaeon of Croton, on which see § 1.2. My summary of the argument basically follows Bett 1986, who should be consulted for further detail; a lucid reconstruction is also provided by Rowe 1986, 174-175. See further Blyth 1997.
and ends by equating soul with “that which moves itself by itself” (τὸ αὐτὸ ἑαυτὸ κινοῦν, 245e7-246a1). The body of the argument links these claims with two independent lines of thought to the effect that a self-mover must be immortal.

The first argument for the immortality of self-movers (245c5-8) relies on analyzing immortality as constant motion (τὸ γὰρ ἀεικίνητον ἀθάνατον). Motion (κίνησις) here is thus treated as coextensive with life (ζωή). But a self-mover will never stop moving, since this would amount to “abandoning itself” (ἀπολεῖπον ἑαυτό), i.e. becoming something other than what it is. This line of argument, as many have noticed, is similar to the Final Argument of the *Phaedo* (102a-107a) and is vulnerable to the same objection: to show that life is inherent in the definition of soul, such that soul is always alive as long as it exists as soul, does not establish that soul always exists. The second, more complicated line of thought (245c8-e2) appeals to the idea that what moves itself must be a “principle” (ἀρχή) of motion and generation for other things. Since all generation is from such a principle, a principle must itself be ungenerated (ἀγένητον) in order to avoid an infinite regress. This means it must also be indestructible (ἀδιάφθορον), since if it was destroyed it could never be regenerated, nor anything thing else generated from it, and all motion and generation in the universe would end, *per impossibile*. Self-movers, as principles, are thus immortal.

Two points should be noticed. First, the claim that soul is ungenerated contrasts sharply with the straight-forward content of the “likely story” in the *Timaeus*, whereby souls are created by the cosmic craftsman and the lesser gods. Second, if soul functions as a first mover whose destruction would bring the entire universe to a halt, then it seems that there must be in some sense *just one* soul. Bett proposes that Socrates is talking about soul as a “mass term,” so that the words “all soul” in the opening claim would refer to all soul in the universe collectively. This solution fits nicely with the speculative interpretation of Plato’s views on the nature of the soul that I proposed in the last chapter (§ 2.4). Bett further claims that “it will follow, on this understanding, that any given individual soul is

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41 Bett 1986, 6.
immortal.\footnote{Betti 1986: 12-13.} But in fact the latter claim follows in only a limited sense: the soul-stuff in any human soul may be immortal, but nothing prevents it being reincorporated into the rest of soul, ending its individual existence.\footnote{The similarity to the Stoic view is obvious. The ancient commentator Hermias (In Phaedrum 102.10-15) preserves some traces of a debate on the meaning of Plato’s phrase ἡ ψυχὴ πᾶσα, in which the Stoic Poseidonius held that it referred to the cosmic soul. On this connection see Ju 2009.} The proof cannot claim to establish the immortality of a particular human being’s soul.

Socrates, however, certainly does not call attention to this gap when he immediately moves on to a discussion of the individual soul. As in the Republic, he juxtaposes the proof of the soul’s immortality with a discussion of its structure:

“Enough about its immortality. Here is what we must say about the soul’s form (ἰδέας). What sort of thing it is (ὅλον μέν ἐστι) is entirely a matter for a narrative that is long and in every way divine, but what it is like (ὅ δὲ ἐστιν) for one that is human and shorter—so let’s speak in the latter way. Let the soul be like (ἐστιν) a grown-together power (συμφύτῳ δύναμι) of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. For the gods, the charioteers and horses are all good and of good descent, but those in other souls are mixed (μέμεικται). First of all, our ruler is in charge of a pair of horses. Then, one of these is beautiful and good and descended from such, while the other is the opposite and from the opposite kind. Thus the task of driving us is by necessity difficult and unpleasant.” (246a3-b4)

Socrates here explicitly renounces the aim of the Affinity Argument in the Phaedo, to say “what sort of thing” the soul is, on the grounds that such an account would be “divine” and excessively long—a recusatio similar to his allusion to the “longer road” in the Republic. Instead, he will make use of an image, that of a “pair of winged horses and a charioteer.” One of the horses is good, the other bad.

This image of the soul as a chariot team provides the basis for the myth that follows (of which I here offer a brief and literal summary). All soul, Socrates says, “cares for the unensouled” (246b). As long as souls preserve their wings, they circle around the heavens in flight, human ones following divine in an ordered procession (246e-247a); together they “manage the universe” (246c). As they fly, some charioteers of human souls just manage to peer above the upper rim of the sky and catch a delightful glimpse of the Forms in a
“place beyond the heaven” (247c), a vision that nourishes and strengthens the wings of the soul (246e, 248b). The role of divine and disembodied human souls is thus represented as double: they participate in the governance of the sensible world, while also making contact with intelligible realities beyond it.

Yet because the human souls (in contrast to divine ones) are “mixed,” they are constantly troubled and weighed down by the horses, especially the bad one (247b, 248a). As a result, some barely catch sight of the Forms, while others fail to see them at all in a particular turn around the heavens (248a-b). In the latter case, the souls lose their wings and fall to earth, where, instead of managing the universe, they take on the less glorious task of managing an individual body (248c). They enter into a complex cycle of reincarnations—sometimes into animals, and also involving periods of punishment “in the places of judgment under the earth”—that lasts ten thousand years, except for those who practice philosophy, who can escape after three thousand (248c-249b).

The division of the soul in the Phaedrus into three aspects[] has been assimilated since antiquity to the tripartite model of soul from the Republic and the Timaeus. The rational part is represented by the charioteer, who alone actually beholds the Forms and thus has access to the intelligible world (248a). The good horse, meanwhile, is described as a “lover of honor (τιμῆς ἐραστής), along with moderation and shame, a companion of truthful opinion” who is obedient “only to commands and speech” (253d). This recalls the description of the spirited part of the soul in the Republic as “loving honor” (φιλότιμον, 581b). Finally, the

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44Like Timaeus, Socrates in the Phaedrus does not use the language of parthood at all. As often in the Republic, he speaks of there being three “forms” (εἴδη, 253c) in the soul.
45Cf. Plutarch, Platonic Questions 9, 1008c.
46If the good horse represents spiritedness, then its description as a “companion of truthful opinion” seems relevant to the question of what kind of cognitive resources are available to θυμός. Lorenz 2006, 74-110 argues at length that Plato in the Timaeus (but not in the Republic) denies that appetite can form or access opinions (δόξαι) given that, according to the Theaetetus (184-187), opinion in fact requires acquaintance with intelligibles, which only the rational part of the soul possesses. Lorenz, by design, avoids raising the parallel question about spiritedness, nor does he discuss the Phaedrus at all.
bad horse in embodied human beings seems to represent the appetite, above all the sexual appetite.\footnote{Plausible as all this may sound, there are also reasons for resisting a close identification of the chariot image in the \textit{Phaedrus} with the tripartite soul elsewhere. The good horse is notably never described as “spirited” (indeed \textit{θυμός} and related words are completely absent from the dialogue), nor is the bad horse explicitly given responsibility for appetite in general. The bad horse also seems to lack the internal diversity and multiplicity that elsewhere characterizes Plato’s images of the appetitive part. Notice also that in his first (repudiated) speech, Socrates offers a comment on moral psychology that seems to foreshadow the chariot image but also suggests a bipartite model of the soul: “One must comprehend that in each of us there are two ruling and leading forms (\textit{ἰδέα}), which we follow wherever they lead: a desire for pleasures that is naturally emplanted, and an opinion acquired in addition, which aims at what is best. These things in us sometimes are in concord, and sometimes in conflict” (237d6-e1). Perhaps the image of the chariot might be fruitfully compared with the famous image of our souls as “divine puppets” in the \textit{Laws} (644d-645b).}

If this parallel is correct, then in the \textit{Phaedrus} the lower aspects of the soul are explicitly portrayed as integrally present in the immortal soul even when in its disembodied state. This cannot be explained away as just an isolated or trivial detail mentioned \textit{en passant} in a poetic or metaphorical passage, since the inclusion of the horses in the immortal soul is essential to the coherence of the entire myth. They alone possess the wings that allow the teams to circle the heavens, and it is only because of the bad behavior of the horses that souls fall, lose their wings, and enter into bodies at all. The lower soul parts (or at least the inclinations that they involve) thus must exist prior to embodiment, at least according to the mythic description in the Palinode.

Rather than effacing non-rational motivations from his image of true human nature (as apparently in the \textit{Republic}), Socrates in the \textit{Phaedrus} thus emphatically includes them. As Broadie points out, this makes embodiment, or at least the initial instance of embodiment, a moral “fall” for which the individual soul is at fault—in contrast to the \textit{Timaeus}, where embodiment is the result of necessity, one and the same for all.\footnote{Broadie 2012, 104.} In the \textit{Phaedrus}, moreover, the negative consequences of embodiment are figuratively presented not as the acquisition of alien accretions but as the loss of natural appendages: “in the past (τὸ πάλαι),” Socrates says, “the soul was entirely feathered” (251b). Transcending the condition of embodiment through love thus involves not “scraping off” sea-detritus but rather growing a new winged nature (\textit{πτεροφύειν}, 251c, 255d).
This illuminates Socrates’ somewhat obscure description of the soul as a “grown-together power” (σύμφυτος δύναμις). The adjective σύμφυτος, translated as “innate” in the context of the argument for the immortality of the soul in the Republic, stands in etymological contrast to σύνθετος (“composite”). The latter term suggests a combination that is somehow artificial or contingent, while σύμφυτος suggests a much stronger kind of bond: a natural combination (i.e. based in φύσις) of things that were “born together” or that have “grown together.”

The soul, according to Socrates’ image in the Phaedrus, is thus one single thing containing an inner diversity. As in the argument for immortality in the Republic, the soul in the Phaedrus has a “innate evil,” i.e. a structurally inherent tendency to vice due to its internal division.

But do not spirit and appetite simply depend on embodiment for their very existence? In the Timaeus this is made very explicit: the mortal soul parts are created subsequent to, and because of, soul’s placement into a body. And if, as in Book IX of the Republic, spirit and appetite are to be defined with reference to their typical objects (honor and wealth, which seem to be only available to embodied humans living in human communities), then it is unclear what these lower soul parts would do in immortal souls. Note that the myth told by Socrates in the Phaedrus seems designed to accommodate this objection. The chariot-teams exist in a social environment: they form a hierarchy under the different gods and compete with the other horses for a view of the “place beyond the heaven.” The horses are also said to take nourishment (246e, 247b).

This point of difference regarding the soul between the Republic and the Timaeus on the one hand and the Phaedrus on the other corresponds in part to the works’ very different estimations of erotic love (ἔρως). In the Republic erotic love plays a rather marginal role, being generally seen as a force destructive to civic community that must be restrained: it is grouped with hunger and thirst as a form of appetite found in the lowest part of the soul (439d) and portrayed as the cause of tyranny in Book IX (cf. e.g. 573b-d). In the

49 The sense of the prefix in the word σύμφυτος is ambiguous. It is either temporal, yielding “born at the same time,” i.e. congenital or innate (so Pindar’s συμφύτα ἀρετά, Isthmian 3.14), or spatial, yielding “grown together.”

50 As Woolf 2012, 153-155 argues.
Timaeus it is likewise described negatively, being counted among the “terrible but necessary affections” in the mortal soul (69d, cf. 42a) that disrupt our original psychic isomorphism with the cosmos (which the practice of philosophy then aims to recover). In the Palinode in the Phaedrus, by contrast, Socrates argues that erotic madness is “given from the gods as the greatest good fortune” (245b-c). Erotic attraction between a lover and a beloved (in which the bad horse fully participates) is understood as the result of recollection of the Forms perceived by the disembodied soul (249e-251b), a spur to a blessed earthly existence that includes the practice of philosophy (256a-b).

The “inconsistency” between these three dialogues thus runs very deep. The apparent disagreement about which parts of the soul are immortal is not an isolated point of doctrinal variation: rather, each of the three dialogues that we have been considering presents a very distinctive picture of the human soul in all respects, the details of which are motivated by the specific thematic concerns of each work. Obvious parallels invite comparisons between dialogues, which nonetheless seem deliberately constructed to resist systematization. We cannot, then, read these texts as merely encoded literary presentations of one final or evolving view. I will conclude the portion of this chapter devoted to Plato by reflecting very briefly on this problem.

Two things that these three dialogues have in common are, first, expressions of doubt about our ability to perceive or know the nature of the soul and, second, a corresponding

\[51\] Among attempts to mend the surface inconsistency, we can single out Gerson 1987, 93-94, who, proceeding from the assumption that the Republic and the Timaeus both assert the immortality of the rational soul alone, attempts to interpret the Phaedrus so as to eliminate the conflict. He holds that the chariot-team represents not the tripartite soul, but rather the “divided self”—a kind of diversity already present within the rational part when disembodied, which “manifests” itself as tripartition when the soul is embodied. The rational part is itself divided because “perfect noetic activity is not possible for it.” As an observation about how Plato describes the rational part this seems correct: recall how in the Republic the rational parts loves ruling as well as wisdom, or how disembodied souls in the Phaedrus “manage the universe” as well as trying to see the Forms. A devastating textual objection to this interpretation, however, is that in the Phaedrus the chariot-team image is used to represent the soul both when disembodied and when embodied (as Gerson 1987, 93n45 admits). In the latter case, we see the image used to explain an entertaining case of psychic conflict (the lover’s hesitancy to approach the beloved) very much along the lines of the moral psychology of the Republic, with the horses playing the role of the two lower soul parts. It seems unlikely that we are supposed to read the image in two very different ways, when Socrates does nothing to signal a shift.
retreat to images or myths to describe the soul’s nature. Both of these points are best illustrated by the *Phaedrus*. The view that we have been exploring so far in this section is found in the mythical context of the Palinode; in the rest of the dialogue, the question of the true nature of the soul is in fact conspicuously raised and left unanswered. Early on in the work, Socrates famously says that rather than rationalizing traditional myths he prefers to examine himself, in order to discover whether he happens to be “some beast more twisted and more fiery than Typhon, or a gentler and simpler animal, partaking by nature in some divine and unswollen (ἀτύφου) lot” (230a). Typhon, a many-headed monster, presumably represents the appetitive and perhaps also the spirited part of the soul, so Socrates seems to be asking whether or not these soul parts constitute or at least belong to his real self. Later, he declares that the true art of rhetoric must involve knowledge of “the nature of soul” (271a), in particular “whether it is naturally one and similar (ἕν καὶ ὅμοιον) or multiform like the shape of a body” (κατὰ σώματος μορφὴν πολυειδές). As we have seen, Socrates similarly leaves open the question of whether the soul is “multiform or uniform” in *Republic X*.

These passages suggest that Plato’s real position, at least as it emerges from the dialogues, is a suspension of judgment about whether the soul is complex and conflicted or rather a divine unity. We may not even be able to know how much we can know about this. Here the two passages just cited from the *Phaedrus* are in some tension with each other. The first presents knowledge of the soul as the regulative aim of an ongoing and perhaps endless Delphic-Socratic project of “knowing oneself.” The second holds out the possibility that it could be made the object of an epistemologically secure τέχνη. Plato’s ubiquitous use of images to describe the soul is thus not merely a way of encoding philosophical views in an aesthetically pleasing form, but is rather a response to a higher-order uncertainty about our

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52 By “images” I mean generally brief comparisons or similes, signalled as such, that aim to illuminate something else. Myths (about which I will have more to say in the next chapter) are narratives that unfold temporally. In the *Phaedrus*, obviously, both are in play.

53 “More fiery” translates the participle ἐπιτεθυμμένον, which derives from the verb ἐπιτύφομαι, ‘to be burnt up.’ The form suggests a connection both, etymologically, with θυμός and, impressionistically, with ἐπιθυμία.

54 See Morgan 2012 for a more detailed analysis of this passage along these same lines.
ability to know it. In this regard, at least, we will see that later Platonists are, for better or for worse, more optimistic than Plato.

3.4 The Platonist debate about the extent of immortality

The Platonic texts that we have been considering generated considerable debate in antiquity, but chiefly with regard to the narrow and reductively literal-minded question of whether Plato considered the whole soul or only its rational part to be immortal. In this section, I will briefly survey a selection of our evidence for this debate. We can again begin with Alcinous and his post-Augustan handbook, the Didaskalikos. He tends to the position that only the rational soul is immortal:

One can securely affirm that rational souls (λογικαὶ ψυχαί) are immortal according to Plato, but whether the irrational ones are as well is one of the things that are debated. It is persuasive (πιθανόν) that irrational souls, driven by mere representation (φαντασία) and not using reasoning (λογισμῷ) or judgment or theorems or their assemblages or general concepts, and being completely without cognition of the intelligible nature, do not have the same substance (οὐσία) as rational souls, but are mortal and corruptible. (25.5)

Alcinous does not consider this as a purely exegetical question, but presents his own argument that goes somewhat beyond Plato’s own texts. He suggests that “rational souls” must have a different kind of substance than “irrational” ones, i.e. the lower two soul parts, because they rely on “reasoning” rather than “representation.” This general picture comes from the Timaeus, where the mortal and immortal souls do indeed seem to be of different substances. There too the lowest part of the soul (but not the spirited part) is said to “take part not at all in opinion and calculation and intellect” (77b), but rather to be guided by “appearances” (φαντάσματα) projected on the liver (71a). Alcinous calls his conclusion merely “persuasive,” a term associated with the tradition of Academic skepticism.

A different perspective comes from the philosophical doctor Galen (active probably after Alcinous in the 2nd century CE), in his De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis. Although
Galen enthusiastically accepts Plato’s doctrine of psychic tripartition, he cites the guarded remark of Timaeus about our ability to know the soul (cited above, 72d) as a ground for saying nothing “about the substance (οὐσίας) of the three parts of the soul, nor about its immortality,” remaining silent in particular as to whether Plato “was using the authoritative sense of the word when in the *Timaeus* he said that two parts of the soul were mortal (θνητά), or whether he named them in this way, despite the fact that they are immortal, because they are worse than the calculating part” (IX.9.8). Galen does not explicitly raise the related possibility (which I have argued for), that in fact the calculating part was called “immortal” in such a transferred sense. He continues:

Whether the spirited and appetitive parts are really immortal, as many of the Platonists think, or whether they are authoritatively called mortal as in the *Timaeus*, is an issue not at all useful either for medicine or for what is called or ethical and political philosophy, and has been suitably passed over by doctors and many philosophers. It is more a matter for theoretical than practical philosophy. I have shown that Plato himself agrees, through what he says in the *Timaeus*, that the demonstrations (ἀποδείξεις) about these matters do not have security (τὸ βέβαιον). But one cannot say the same about the things he writes in the fourth book of the *Republic*, that they only go so far as the persuasive (πιθανοῦ). On the contrary, to me the demonstrations seem scientific (ἐπιστημονικαί) by which he demonstrates that the calculating [form] is one thing, the spirited another, and the appetitive another. (IX.9.9-12)

Galen thus attests to the existence of a camp opposed to that of Alcinous, including “many of the Platonists” (πολλοὶ τῶν Πλατωνικῶν), who held (along the lines of the *Phaedrus*) that the entire soul was immortal. Two points are worth noticing about Galen’s own view. While it is unsurprising for the doctor to hold that whether the lower soul parts are immortal is of no interest to medicine, it is striking that he also sees this as having no relevance for ethics and politics. Second, Galen holds that the doctrine of tripartition is much more securely founded than the immortality of the soul; he does not try to reconcile them by appealing to a contrast between the soul’s “true” and “apparent” nature, as Socrates does in *Republic* X. For Galen, *all* of Plato’s speculation about the soul’s immortality belongs merely to the realm of the “persuasive.”

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55 See Schiefsky 2012.
The full breadth of the debate becomes clear from a doxographical report in the first commentary on the *Phaedo* by Damascius. He gives six (!) different views on the question:

[1] Some make immortal everything from the rational soul down to the ensouled condition (ἄχρι τῆς ἐμψύχου ἕξεως), like Numenius; [2] others as far as nature (μέχρι τῆς φύσεως), like Plotinus in some places; [3] others as far as irrationality (μέχρι τῆς ἄλογίας), like Xenocrates and Speusippus among the ancients and Iamblichus and Plutarch [of Athens] among the more recent; [4] others only as far as the rational soul, like Proclus and Porphyry; [5] others, only as far as intellect (μέχρι μόνου τοῦ νοοῦ), for opinion decays, like many of the Peripatetics; [6] some as far as the whole soul (μέχρι τῆς ὅλης ψυχῆς), for the partial souls decay into the whole. (*In Phaedonem* I 177)

The opposing sides in the debate reflected in Alcinous and Galen correspond to [4] and [3], respectively. Intriguing is the claim that Speusippus and Xenocrates, Plato’s immediate successors as leaders of the Old Academy, held the whole soul to be immortal, i.e. including the irrational parts. Positions [5] and [6], which deny immortality even to the rational part of the human soul, belong to non-Platonist schools. (No line is drawn here between Platonist and non-Platonist perspectives.) The fifth view reflects one strand in the interpretation of Aristotle’s statements about the immortality of the intellect in *De anima* III.5 (which, as the wording of the report reflects, not all the Peripatetics accepted). The unnamed final group are the Stoics, who held that individual souls were (eventually) reincorporated into the world soul (“the whole soul”) after death.

The first two positions, which also belong to Platonists, assign immortality even to non-human souls. The key to understanding these *prima facie* perplexing views is to recognize the Stoic provenance of the terminology in which they are expressed. For the Stoics, πνεῦμα, the corporeal constituent of soul, is a ubiquitous presence, blended throughout the entire universe. But not all πνεῦμα is soul: for the Stoics only animals possess *psukhe* in the strict sense. The Stoics referred to the non-psychic πνεῦμα responsible for the shape and coherence of all corporeal objects (including living ones) as ἔξις, and to the πνεῦμα

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56 As this long doxographical report seems out of place in its context (cf. Dörrie 1957, 420-421), it is tempting to conclude that it was inserted somewhat haphazardly into the commentary (by Damascius or someone else) from another source. In this light, it seems significant, and has not been adequately noticed, that (1) Stoic terminology is present, (2) the Stoic position is presented last, and (3) the Stoics are the only group not named or represented by named figures. Could the passage have originated in a Stoic source?
responsible for nutrition and growth in plants (as well as in animals and humans) as φύσις.  

Thus Numenius (a Syrian Platonist from the 2nd century CE whose works have not survived intact) seems to have attributed immortality even to the organizing principle responsible for the shape and form of living things. (On neither the Stoic nor the Platonic view would this organizing principle count as ψυχή in the strict sense.) The second position, that of Plotinus “in some places,” involves attributing immortality even to the aspect of soul that is responsible for nutrition and growth, with the result that even plants would have an immortal psukhe. It is to Plotinus that we now turn.

3.5 Plotinus on the “true human being” (Ennead IV.7.10-14, I.1.1-12)

This section examines in more detail Plotinus’s position in the Platonist debate over the extent of immortality of the soul, on the basis of his own texts. I begin by returning to his early treatise “On the Immortality of the Soul” (Ennead IV.7), which presents an expansive conception of what is immortal, corresponding to the report of Plotinus’s view found in the commentary by Damascius. I then explore the more complicated position found in a much later treatise, “On What is the Living Being and What is the Human Being” (Ennead I.1).

In the tenth chapter of Ennead IV.7, after the conclusion of the long critique of psychic corporealism that was discussed in the previous chapter, Plotinus proposes a positive examination of the human soul, “of what sort it is by nature” (οἷόν ἐστι τὴν φύσιν, 10.7). He begins with a thought-experiment. Consider a soul that “has not taken on the irrational appetites (ἐπιθυμίας) and wraths (θυμούς) in the body,” but that has instead “rubbed these off and as far as possible has no partnership with the body” (10.7-11). In other words, imagine a living human being who does not experience the affections associated with the lower soul parts (which she still possesses). The very possibility of such a pure soul’s existence demonstrates

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57 On this complex issue, see Long 1982.
58 The phrase ἀχρὶ τῆς ἐμψύχου ἕξεως has been interpreted in many ways. The adjective ἐμψύχος presumably limits Numenius’s claim to the organizing principle in things with souls, but this can be read in two ways. On a Platonic view, things with souls are human beings, animals, and plants; on a Stoic view, plants are excluded. The Platonic reading gives a cleaner progression from broader to narrower conceptions of what is immortal, but the use of Stoic terminology would be more consistent with the rest of the report.
that the bad affections are “additions (προσθήκαι) to the soul from elsewhere” and can be removed, while “intelligence (φρόνησις) and the rest of virtue” are proper (οἰκεῖα) to the soul (10.11-13). But intelligence and true virtue are divine (θεία) and could not come to be “in a low and mortal thing,” so the soul must therefore itself be divine, “having a share in divine things due to its relationship and shared substance” (10.16-20).

Plotinus admits that the ideal, purified souls of his thought-experiment are rare, with the result that most people have little confidence that the soul is immortal:

If every human being was like this, or if a great number of people had souls like this, no one would be so untrusting (ἄπιστος) as not to trust that their souls were in every way immortal. But now in many cases, seeing (ὁρῶντες) the soul in most people to be mutilated (λελωβημένην), people do not think about it as a divine or immortal thing. We must examine the nature of each thing by looking off to a pure version of it (εἰς τὸ καθαρὸν αὐτοῦ ἀφορῶντα), if indeed what has been added (τὸ προστεθέν) always becomes a hindrance to knowledge of what it has been added to. Examine it having taken away the rest, or rather let the one who takes away look at himself and trust that he is immortal, when he observes (θεάσηται) himself having come to be in what is intelligible and pure. (IV.7.10.22-32)

The language used by Plotinus closely echoes that of Socrates in offering the image of Glaucus in the Republic. A clear point of difference, however, lies in Plotinus’s confidence that introspection can allow us to observe unproblematically the soul’s true nature.

Psychic tripartition is mentioned next in the treatise’s penultimate, fourteenth chapter. Here Plotinus, who follows Plato and Aristotle in thinking that all living things, including non-human animals and plants, have souls, addresses the question of whether these souls are immortal too:

Concerning the soul of other animals, those of them that went astray [as humans] and came into the bodies of beasts, it is necessary that these be immortal as well. If there is some other form of soul, this too cannot be from anywhere else than the nature that is alive and must itself be the cause of life for animals and even of the life in plants. For all were started from the same principle, having their own life; these too are bodiless and partless substances. (IV.7.14.1-8)

59 The expression ἀνάγκη θεῖον τὸ τοιοῦτον εἶναι, ἅτε θείων μετὸν αὐτῷ διὰ συγγένειαν καὶ τὸ ὁμοούσιον (10.18-19) hints at an important shift between Plato and Plotinus: the “relationship” between the soul and god begins to be understood as involving “shared substance” (cf. § 2.1). For the vexed history of the term ὁμοούσιος, of great importance in Christian theology, see Beatrice 2002.
If the human soul is immortal, then the doctrine that human souls are reincarnated in beasts as a punishment (a doctrine that Plotinus appears to take seriously) implies that at least some non-human animals are animated by immortal souls. But Plotinus goes further than this, as the report in Damascius suggests, and asserts that the souls in all animals and plants are immortal. This shows that Plotinus must be thinking of immortality in a literal sense—as animals and plants could not enjoy a quasi-divine life devoted to reason.

Plotinus here gives two reasons that all soul is immortal. First, every soul originates from the same principle, i.e. “from the nature that is alive” (ἀπὸ τῆς ζώσης φύσεως), and thus has its “own life” (ζωὴν ἔχουσαι οἰκείαν); this seems to refer to the analytic connection between soul and life (ζωή) exploited by Socrates in the Final Argument of the Phaedo. Second, all individual souls are “bodiless and partless and substantial” (ἀσώματοί...καὶ ἀμερεῖς καὶ οὐσίαι). In the previous chapters of the treatise, Plotinus has argued that the human soul has these attributes. But this notion that the soul is immortal because it is partless, Plotinus now finally acknowledges, seems to conflict with the Platonic doctrine of psychic tripartition:

But if it said that the human soul will be dissolved because it is composite, being tripartite (τριμερῇ), we too will say that pure souls, when released, will let go of what was moulded on at birth (τὸ προσπλασθὲν ἐν τῇ γένεσι), while others will remain with this for a very long while. But not even what is let go, the worse, will perish, as long as that from which it has its principle exists (ἔκ τοῦ ὄντος ἐκ τοῦ ὄντος). For nothing from what is (ἐκ τοῦ ὄντος) will be destroyed. (IV.7.14.8-14)

Presumably “what was moulded on at birth” are the two lower, “worse” soul parts, while the “pure souls” consist of merely the highest, rational part. The worse parts of the soul are accretions due to embodiment that the higher soul will “let go of” either at the moment of death or later. Yet despite the fact that they will be discarded, these lower parts will

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60 Note that Plato’s Timaeus assigns plants only the worse type of the so-called mortal soul, which has no relation to reason at all (77b), while Aristotle gives them only the type of soul responsible for nutrition and growth (De anima 413a31-b5).

61 I translate the text printed in the Oxford editio minor of Henry and Schwyzer, which reads τῷ συνθέτῳ λυθήσεται <λέγεται> καὶ ἡμεῖς φόσομεν, etc.
still escape destruction. There is, in other words, nothing specifically immortal about the rational part of the soul, as opposed to the other soul parts. All will survive.\footnote{Such a view is not without precedent in Plato. Most obviously, the proof given in the \textit{Phaedrus} targets “all soul.” Moreover, as \cite{Longo2009}, 236n45 notes, Socrates introduces the Cyclical Argument for the soul’s immortality in the \textit{Phaedo} with the comment that its logic should apply not only to human beings but also “all animals and plants and in general anything that has a coming-to-be” (70d).}

As noted in the previous chapter, \textit{Ennead} IV.7 was only the second treatise written by Plotinus. In the rest of this section, I will move on to the different and much more complex views found in the second-to-last treatise he composed, shortly before his death: “On What is the Living Being and What is the Human Being” (\textit{Ennead} I.1). On one level, this work is a sophisticated, almost scholarly attempt to reconcile a wide variety of Platonic and Aristotelian views about the soul. But Plotinus also goes beyond his predecessors in radicalizing the ideas about selfhood that we have been considering so far in this chapter.\footnote{On Plotinus on selfhood, see the monographs of \cite{ODaly1973} and \cite{Remes2007}.}

As Porphyry’s title for the treatise suggests, Plotinus will emphasize the non-identity between the embodied “living being” or “animal” (τὸ ζῷον) and the “human being.”

Plotinus’s most surprising innovation is his positing of a new entity between soul and body, which he refers to (sometimes) as the “image of soul.” According to his frequent metaphor, this soul-image is generated by soul in the manner of an illumination. (This pattern, whereby higher entities generate lower ones as inferior copies of themselves, is found throughout Plotinian metaphysics.\footnote{For more detail on this principle, the so-called doctrine of double activity, see the detailed account of \cite{Emilsson2007}, 22-68. I will largely ignore this wider context in what follows.}) According to this theory, a living being or animal is best described as a compound not of body and soul but of body and soul-image; soul itself does not descend into the compound.\footnote{Cf. \cite{Cooper2012}, 331-334 for a lucid summary of the soul-image doctrine.} A natural question about the soul-image is what motivates its introduction. Is this not merely an instance of a Platonist tendency to multiply metaphysical entities beyond necessity? In this section, I will argue that Plotinus’s commitment to the soul’s immortality is crucial to understanding his reasons for this move in \textit{Ennead} I.1.

The basic puzzle that the treatise confronts is laid out at the start of the second chapter:
First we must find out whether soul is one thing and the essence of soul another. If they are different, then the soul would be a composite thing and it would not be strange for the soul to receive affections (πάθη) and for the affections to belong to it, if this is where the argument leads, and in general better and worse states and conditions. Or, if soul and the essence of soul are the same, the soul would be a certain form, unable to receive all these activities, but capable of conferring them on something else, having in itself the activity that is innate (συμφαῖ) for itself, whatever the argument says this is. (I.1.2.1-9)

The formulation of the problem comes from Aristotle, who claims that soul and the essence of soul (ψυχῇ ἐἶναι, literally “being for a soul”) are the same (Metaphysics H.3, 1043b2). For Aristotle this means that the soul is a form, which he aligns with the notion of an essence (τὸ τί ἦν ἐἶναι). A composite of form and matter, like a human being, is not the same as its essence. Plotinus follows this terminology precisely: the identity of soul and its essence would mean that soul is a form (εἶδος), while their non-identity would make soul a composite (σύνθετον). Notice that this use of the term “composite” (for a combination of form and matter) is different from the one that has become familiar to us (applied to anything composed of parts).66

This seemingly arcane ontological question has, for Plotinus, wide-reaching implications. If the soul is a form, then it is without affections or passions (πάθη). At the broadest level, this is because the Aristotelian analysis of how change occurs requires both matter and form (cf. Physics I.7); forms are thus, as Plato would agree, exempt from change, and to suffer an affection is to undergo a kind of change. But if the soul is without affections, Plotinus continues, then it is not the subject of fear, confidence, desire, and pain (2.13-25). In general, it is exempt from all the states associated with the lower two parts of Plato’s tripartite soul. More worryingly, the soul will no longer possess “perception and thought (διάνοια) and opinion”—all of which for Plato belong to the rational soul—though it may retain intellection (νόησις) and pure pleasures (2.25-30). This radical limitation of the soul’s role in cognitive and emotional life looks like a good reason to reject the view that the soul is

66 The term σύνθετος is never used by Plato to designate the soul-body combination, but Aristotle uses it (in the passage from Nicomachean Ethics X quoted above in §3.2) for the human being considered as a combination of form (soul) and matter (body). The Aristotelian usage is also found in Plotinus: cf. Ennead IV.7.2.22, 85.2, and 12.19.
a form. But there is a cost on the other side as well. For it is only if soul is a form and thus to be identified with its essence, Plotinus says, that “it would be true to call the soul immortal, if indeed what is immortal and incorruptible (ἄφθαρτον) must be unaffected” (2.9-11). The immortality of the soul is thus made to depend on the soul’s being “unaffected” (ἀπαθής).

The term ἀπάθεια (“unaffectedness” or “impassivity”), although rare in Plato, is of great importance for all the later ancient philosophical tradition. Broadly speaking, it refers to the absence of suffering or any passive experience. Often, it is used in a narrowly ethical sense to refer to resistance to affections originating within the soul. In the pseudo-Platonic Definitions, for instance, ἀπάθεια is defined as the “state in which we do not fall into the passions” (ἐξισομέτρητοι ἐκ τῆς καθάπεσιν ἀνέμπτωτοί ἐσμεν εἰς πάθη, 413a5), where the “passions” can be understood as affections or emotions associated with the lower two parts of the tripartite soul, like anger or love (cf. 413a7). It was in this sense that the term became important in Stoicism, where achieving ἀπάθεια is an important ethical ideal—not in the sense, however, of not experiencing the passions at all, but rather of being able to resist them. Given that Plato’s Socrates (most notably in the Phaedo) does sometimes recommend the purification of the soul from all affections, including emotions and perceptions, to whatever extent possible, Plato might be said to be an early advocate of ἀπάθεια as an ethical ideal.

But the term can also be used in a broader sense to indicate absolute de facto immunity from any passive affection, including ones of external origin. Here Aristotle’s usage is influential. Although he also does not apply the term “unaffected” to the soul, he thinks that the so-called passions of the soul actually belong to the composite of soul and body and that the soul itself is in an important sense unmoved; he does, moreover, use the term “impassive” to describe “intellect” (νοῦς). This notion of the unaffected soul is, by contrast, quite alien to Plato. On a verbal level, we have already seen several instances in which he writes of

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67Plotinus also echoes this worry elsewhere: “we must take care lest in assigning such affections to the soul, we don’t also make it corruptible (φθαρτής) without realizing it” (Ennead III.6.1.29-30).
69Cf. De anima 408b25-29, 405b19, 429b23-24 (the latter two passages summarize the view of Anaxagoras), and the highly controversial 430a22-25, where νοῦς is also called “immortal and eternal.”
the affections (πάθη) of the soul—for instance, the “terrible but necessary affections” of the mortal soul in the Timaeus (69c, cf. Republic 612a, Phaedrus 245c). Indeed (as we will see that Plotinus is aware) the idea of impassivity seems incompatible with the Socratic notion that the soul becomes worse through vice. Thus in the myth at the end of the Gorgias Socrates speaks, admittedly figuratively, of the “affections” (παθηματα) in the soul due to a person’s way of life. In his theory of perception in the Philebus, moreover, Socrates claims that “some bodily affections (παθηματων) are extinguished in the body before reaching the soul, leaving it unaffected (ἀπαθη), while others go through both and produce a shock in each individually and in both in common” (33d).

In making the soul’s immortality depend on its being essentially unaffected, Plotinus has thus departed from Plato in several respects. Whereas for Plato striving to be unaffected by the passions to whatever extent possible is presented as a way of achieving immortality or divinity, for Plotinus absolute immunity to passive affections is a precondition of the soul’s immortal nature. Though this sentence that we have been discussing (2.9-11) is the only explicit mention of immortality in Ennead I.1, it sets up a dilemma that is pivotal for the entire treatise. Plotinus will in fact opt to preserve the soul’s unaffected condition and thus its immortality, even though this will require entirely rethinking soul’s role in human life. The core of his solution is the introduction of the soul-image.

Soul, Plotinus suggests, is not actually present in a compound with body at all. Instead of “giving itself” to the compound or the body, soul, “from a body of a certain sort and something like light that is given as something distinct from [soul] itself, makes something else, the nature of the animal, to which perceiving and the other affections of the animal are said to belong” (7.3-6). Soul is thus itself unaffected and does not descend into a body at

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70 Of course it is not easy to explain precisely how, for Socrates, the soul is harmed by wrongdoing. For an attempt to do so within the framework of Socratic intellectualism, see Brickhouse and Smith 2007.

71 I owe my conception of the overall shape of the argument in Ennead I.1 to Hendrik Lorenz and the participants in his Fall 2012 seminar on this text in Princeton.

72 The OCT text, which basically follows the manuscripts, reads: φωτος τοι παρ αυτην δοθητος την του ζωου φυσιν ετερων τι. Henry and Schwizer, sensing the unusual difficulty, offer a translation of φωτος...φυσιν in their critical apparatus as luminis ob ipsam animalis naturam dati. This requires both a striking hyperbaton (παρ αυτην...την φυσιν). The meaning is perhaps possible (the kind of light emitted by the soul would in some...
all, but merely emits “something like light.” This illumination is the “image of soul” (εἴδωλον ψυχῆς, 11.12), which joins together with body to form a compound (τὸ συναμφότερον, 7.1). This compound is the nature of the animal, or indeed the animal itself. It is the animal, not the soul, that perceives, experiences emotions, etc.

But does this complex psychological model not threaten to make the soul (and its immortality) practically a matter of indifference to us? If a great part of our emotional and cognitive life belongs to the compound of body and soul-image, our soul seems to become a distant and abstract metaphysical entity. Plato’s Socrates argues that it is the soul that perceives (Theaetetus 184c-d) and even that the human being (ὁ ἄνθρωπος) just is the soul (in the possibly spurious First Alcibiades, 130c-d). Where, in Plotinus’s new schema, do the human being and the self belong? It is in “thought and opinions and acts of intellection,” Plotinus claims, that the self is most present:

That is where we are most of all (ἔνθα δὴ ἡμεῖς μάλιστα). The things below this are ours (ἡμέτερα), but we are from there up (τὸ ἐντεῦθεν ἄνω), presiding over the living being. But nothing prevents us from calling the whole thing the living being, the things below being mixed, while from there [up] is pretty much the true human being (ὁ ἄνθρωπος ὁ ἀληθής σχεδόν). Those things [below] are the lionlike and the whole various beast (τὸ λεοντῶδες καὶ τὸ ποικίλον ὅλως θηρίον). Since the human being coincides with (συνδρόμου...ἄνωτος) the rational soul, whenever we reason, it is we who reason, because reasonings are activations of soul. (I.1.7.16-24)

The contrast between “us” and what is “ours” echoes that of Socrates in the Apology between caring for the self rather than for possessions (ἐπιμελεῖσθαι ἑαυτοῦ vs. τῶν ἑαυτοῦ, 36c), but way correspond to the nature of the particular animal in question?), but on balance it seems unlikely that the “nature of the animal” should exist prior to the soul’s illumination of it. I here adopt the alternative suggested to me by Hendrik Lorenz, who takes παρά in the more normal sense of “beside,” i.e. distinct from and in addition to. One then takes ἄντην to refer to the soul and ἔτερον τι to be in apposition with φύσιν. There is then no need of the tempting emendation found in one manuscript of αὐτήν to αὐτῆς, yielding “light that is given from it.” (Armstrong translates this way in his Loeb, but without emending the text.)

Aristotle rejects this way of talking as going against ordinary language. Just as it would be bizarre to say that the soul weaves or builds a house, it is strange, Aristotle argues, to say that it is the soul, rather than the human being, that gets angry, thinks, and so on (De anima 408b11-15). Plotinus has alluded to this Aristotelian text with approval earlier in his treatise, to make the point that it is the living being or animal (τὸ ζῶον) rather than the soul that has appetites or grieves (4.25-27). Plotinus’ replacement of “human being” with “living being” in quoting this Aristotelian text is, however, very deliberate, since he still wants to hold on, at least verbally, to the Platonic notion that the human being and the self—the referent of the pronoun “we”—is to be identified with the soul.
the opposition is now transferred to a higher level. Plotinus argues that the first-person pronoun can refer to two different things: either the everyday self that includes the non-rational faculties, or the higher self that coincides with the rational soul alone (the rest is merely “ours”). As he later strikingly puts it: “The we is double (διότι οὖν ὁ ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς). Either one counts the beast as part of it, or it is what is above. The beast is the body that has been made alive, but the true human being is someone else, purified from these things” (10.5-7).

Although he is willing to admit that “we” is ambiguous, in both of these passages Plotinus nonetheless insists that the “true human being” is what is above the animal, echoing the image used by Socrates from the ninth book of Plato’s Republic. The difference between Plotinus and Plato might thus seem to be superficial: the two agree that the rational soul is the real human being, while Plato’s lower soul parts correspond to Plotinus’s soul-image. This is deceptive, as the relationship between soul and soul-image is completely different from that between the three parts of the soul. Plato’s three soul-parts can conflict, and reason can be subjugated by the others; this is possible because the lower soul-parts are conceived of either as coeval with the rational part or as impositions from without. For Plotinus, the soul-image comes from the rational soul. (The difference between spiritedness and appetite thus becomes relatively unimportant for Plotinus, and he can refer to both together as the “beast.”)

Although the immortal, impassive soul can have thoughts and opinions and is thus not entirely divorced from worldly concerns, it will not be responsible for evil (9.1-3) or have vices (10.13) or even false opinions (9.4-12). All this is off-loaded onto the soul-image. But this raises a worry about the afterlife, which Plotinus himself brings up: if the soul is thus really “without error” (ἀναμάρτητος), how could the soul possibly pay, or deserve to pay, penalties in the afterlife, “either in Hades or by the fact of being reincarnated” (12.3-4)? Given that the soul was held to be unaffected in part to guarantee its immortality, it seems paradoxical that the soul’s impassivity makes nonsense of much talk about the afterlife.

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Plotinus apparently feels the need to at least try to accommodate what Plato says about postmortem rewards and punishments.75

Plotinus frames the problem as an apparent conflict between two different logoi about the soul, the first his own, the second Plato’s:

The account that makes the soul without error took it to be one entirely simple thing (ἓν ἁπλοῦν πάντη), saying that soul and the being of soul (ψυχὴν καὶ τὸ ψυχῇ εἶναι) are the same, while the account that makes the soul err weaves in and adds (προστίθησιν) to it another form of soul that has terrible affections. The soul itself comes to be composite (σύνθετος) from all these things. The composite is affected as a whole and errs, and it is this that pays the penalty for Plato,76 not that [simple soul]. (I.1.12.6-12)

The two accounts are thus about two different souls, one simple and one composite. Presumably Plotinus thinks that the first is soul in the authoritative sense. It is important to see that in elaborating the second option Plotinus is reporting Plato’s view, not giving his own. The words “another form of soul that has terrible affections” (ἄλλο ψυχῆς εἶδος τὸ τὰ δεινὰ ἔχον πάθη) are derived from the description of the creation of mortal soul in the *Timaeus* (69c)—although there the affections are also called “necessary,” with implications that Plotinus perhaps wants to avoid. Plotinus moreover says that on Plato’s view “the soul itself (ἡ ψυχὴ αὐτή) comes to be composite.” It would be quite impossible, on the view that Plotinus has so far defended in the treatise, to claim this. But this important gap between the two accounts seems to be effaced in what comes next, as Plotinus turns to the image of Glaucus from *Republic* X:

Wherefore he [Plato] says: We have observed it, just like those who see Glaucus in the sea. If one wishes to see its nature, he says, then, after scraping off what has been added on (τὰ προστεθέντα), we must look to its love of wisdom, what things it grasps, and to what things it is related in being what it is. So there is another life and other activities, and what is punished is something different. The soul’s retreat and separation are not only from this body here, but from everything that has been added on (ἀπαντὸς τοῦ προστεθέντος). For the addition (προσθήκη) comes at birth, or birth is of the other form of soul entirely. (I.1.12.12-22)

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75 On this problem for the Platonists in general, see Alt 2002.
76 I follow Armstrong’s Loeb translation in taking αὐτῷ to refer to Plato, whom Plotinus rarely refers to by name, picked up by the (unexpressed) subject of the next sentence. Alternatives: supply ἄνθρωπος (“pays the penalty for the human being”) or read αὐτῷ (“pays the penalty for itself”).
In quoting from the Republic Plotinus makes a small but significant terminological shift. He avoids Plato’s verbs προσφύειν and περιφύειν (“grow onto” or “grow around”), with their etymological link to φύσις (“nature”). Instead, he repeatedly uses forms of the verb προστιθέναι (“add” or “apply”). He does exactly the same in the reworking of the Glaucus passage in Ennead IV.7.10 that I quoted earlier. In contrast to Plato, Plotinus is eager to avoid the slightest hint that the soul’s encrustations could be natural. Embodied existence in the world is, for Plotinus, not at all the soul’s natural state. The soul itself is entirely without any “innate evil.”

But what, then, is “what is punished” (τὸ κολαζόμενον)? Apparently, it is the soul-image. In the rest of the twelfth chapter, Plotinus first turns to why and how the soul descends into body, with the aim of absolving it of responsibility for this apparent mistake. The soul, he says, cannot be blamed for illuminating what is below it, any more than anything can be blamed for casting a shadow. He then discusses whether the soul ever “lets go of the image” (ἀφίησι τὸ εἴδωλον). His compressed and cryptic answer is that the soul will let the image go, “if what receives it is not nearby”—presumably referring to the loss of the body in death. But this letting go does not happen automatically: “It [the soul] lets go not in the sense that it [the image] is cut off, but rather that it [the image] no longer is. It no longer is, when it [the soul] looks entirely over there [to the intelligible world]” (12.29-32). The soul-image will thus continue to exist, in order to be punished, until the soul that generates it turns its illuminating power entirely upward, becoming entirely absorbed in the intelligible world. At this point the soul-image will disappear.

This view, according to which the soul itself is no longer really the subject of moral progress and accountability, is a fundamental departure from Socrates. One might of course object that Plotinus does not successfully absolve the soul of its responsibility. Even if it cannot be blamed for the initial illumination, it would seem that it can be for continuing to sustain the soul-image by not looking entirely upward. Plotinus’s metaphor of illumination, moreover, is obviously not compatible with that of “additions” to the soul, derived from the
image of Glaucus; the two ways of speaking in fact suggest two quite different understandings of soul’s relationship to body. This is a good example of how Plotinus avoids calling attention to how his theories differ from those of Plato in quite significant ways, even when he is invoking Plato’s text as possessing quasi-scriptural authority.

3.6 Platonism and the self

In this chapter I have argued that for both Plato and the Platonists discussions of the immortality of the soul are a chance to work out what a human being fundamentally is. A view that is toyed with by Plato and then embraced by Plotinus is that the “true human being” (as opposed to the mere “living being”) is to be identified with reason, a capacity with the human being that is in some sense related or similar to the divine. Now, the claim that reason is what makes humans different from beasts and similar to gods has of course been a common one in the history of philosophy. More unusual is the notion that reason in some sense “who we really are.” I want to conclude here by very briefly (and impressionistically) contrasting the Platonist identification of the “self” as the rational soul with two other ways of thinking about the selfhood that are prominent in contemporary philosophy. The first is associated with John Locke, the second with “existentialist” thinkers, of whom I will take Søren Kierkegaard as a representative.

In a famous chapter of his Essay Concerning Human Understanding (II.27, “Of Identity and Diversity”), Locke makes a distinction between the human being (“Man”) and the person (II.27.6-9). A human being is “an Animal of such a certain form” whose identity through time consists merely in “participation of the same continued life,” as is also the case for other animals and for plants. (Locke’s “human being” is thus roughly equivalent to the “living being” of Plotinus.) A person, by contrast, is “a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self.” Crucially, the identity or sameness of the person or self though time (“personal identity”) is based on continuity of consciousness and memory. He emphasizes that neither for humans nor for persons is identity necessarily
dependent on soul, about the existence of which he remains prudently agnostic. Locke’s view implies a certain notion of “personal immortality,” i.e. an afterlife in which the identity and consciousness of the individual person is maintained (possibly but not necessarily with a soul as the vehicle). It has seemed to many that postmortem existence could only be desirable if it is personal in Locke’s sense. Locke also holds that personal identity is a requirement for moral accountability (II.27.18), so the preservation of personal identity also seems necessary if there are to be (non-arbitrary) rewards and punishments after death. For these reasons, much contemporary philosophical work on the afterlife has tended to focus on the possibility of personal immortality, i.e. whether we can coherently conceive of how personal identity could be preserved across the event of death.

Locke treats “person” and “self” as synonymous (II.27.26). In this chapter and throughout this entire work, by contrast, I have occasionally allowed the use of the term “self” but minimized that of “person” and “personal” (as well as “personal immortality”), even when this has resulted in some cumbersome periphrases. On a practical level, given that the ancient Greek language has an obvious equivalent for “human being” (ἄνθρωπος) and a tolerably close one for “self” (forms of the pronoun αὐτός), yet no obvious one for “person,” the use of “person” and derived terminology is likely to become confusing in the context of textual exegesis. More importantly, however, questions about personal identity in the Lockean sense play a very limited role in ancient philosophy, and to read Plato and the Platonists in light of the modern notion of the person would radically diminish the distinctive strangeness of their perspectives. While Locke’s view is deferential to common-sense ideas about moral responsibility and the use of words in ordinary language, Plato and the

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77 See e.g. Williams 1993.
78 Cf. e.g. Johnston 2010 and Zimmerman 2012.
79 I here follow the usage of Sorabji 2006.
80 One recent advocate of personhood in Plato is Gerson 2003, 2, who claims that it is “not completely misleading” as a statement of Plato’s position to say “a person is a soul and a human being is a composite of soul and body.” In fact this seems to me very misleading, given texts suggesting that the human being (ἄνθρωπος) is the soul and that the living being or animal (τὸ ζῷον) is the composite of soul and body: cf. First Alcibiades 130c-d, Phaedrus 246c.
81 Pace Barnes 1982, 105-107, who seems to conflate human and personal identity.
Platonists have no such deference, nor do they aim to make sense of ordinary experience: they rather suggest that we can be and indeed often are in a very real sense unknown to ourselves. The “human being inside” and the “true human being” are not descriptions meant to capture our ordinary cognitive life, but rather normative ideals that we should strive for. (A consequence of this is that memory and consciousness of the events of one’s life play a very marginal role in Plato’s doctrine of the immortality of the soul.)

I turn now to the conception of the self found in the work of Søren Kierkegaard. Consider the prima facie perplexing first sentence of the first part of his work *The Sickness Unto Death*, published in 1849:

> The human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates to itself, or that in the relation which is its relation to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation’s relating to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. In short a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two terms. Looked at in this way a human being is not yet a self.

Like Plato and the Platonists, Kierkegaard sees the human being as containing both something finite and temporal and something infinite and eternal (in other words, something mortal and something immortal). But the “true” self for Kierkegaard is not simply equivalent to the “immortal” element within a human being; rather, it is the self-relating of the

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82 It is true that Plato’s myths of the afterlife seem to tacitly assume continuity of both memory and moral accountability, but Plato makes no effort to justify or explain this. (In my view, this is a reason for taking the myths in which the afterlife is described as putting forward only an exoteric, non-philosophical teaching, as I discuss at greater length in the next chapter). Plato more frequently emphasizes how much the soul forgets about its past existences: the doctrine of recollection, as Socrates presents it, holds that the soul has already directly encountered the intelligible world, but does not (or, at least, not clearly) remember what it saw there. Likewise, the doctrine of reincarnation presented in the dialogues seems to require that the soul retains no memory of previous lives: in the myth of the afterlife at the end of the *Republic*, Socrates even explicitly says that souls about to be reincarnated drink from a river that makes them forget everything (621a). This detail might be a deliberate Platonic innovation, against earlier Pythagorean exponents of reincarnation that did involve a continuity of memory. Pythagoras himself seems to have claimed to remember his past lives, for instance being the hero Euphorbus from the Trojan War. But this may have been an unusual privilege (cf. Diogenes Laertius VIII.4-5). I have suggested that Plato is not really serious about reincarnation, but if he were, it would clearly rule out continuity of both humane and personal identity, as Locke himself emphasized: “I think no body, could he be sure that the soul of Heliogabalus were in one of his hogs, would yet say that Hog were a Man or [the person] Heliogabalus” (*Essay* II.27.6). I cannot here treat Plotinus’ vast and fascinating treatment of memory in the disembodied soul in *Ennead* IV.3-4, especially IV.3.25-32.

83 Translation by Alastair Hannay.
relation between the mortal and immortal. As a first approximation, we can say that the Kierkegaardian self is some kind of reflexive attitude that the human being takes on its own dual nature. Such a reflexive attitude may not exist, and in this case the human being is not a self. Kierkegaard thus agrees with the Platonists that true selfhood is not (as Locke would have it) a simple feature of everyday existence, but rather an object of aspiration (the realization of which involves a certain kind of relationship to god). Kierkegaard calls the state in which a human being is not yet a self despair.

Kierkegaard’s view departs from that of the Platonists in two important ways. First, Kierkegaard moves the “self” into a different ontological category, strikingly claiming that it is not a substance (the soul, or the immortal part of the soul) but rather a relation. Although Locke also avoids relying on the notion of a substantial soul, his way of talking of the self persisting through time nonetheless involves a covert reification of the self. Second, Kierkegaard later provocatively says that the possibility of being in despair is in fact “man’s advantage over the beast.” This statement is an implicit but decisive repudiation of the view that reason or logos is what is especially distinctive or highest in human nature. For Kierkegaard, the painful awareness of “not yet being a self” should lead us to work to achieve true individual selfhood—not abandon it on an ascent to the intelligible realm.

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84 Cf. Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, §25: “As something self-same in manifold otherness, this subject has the character of the self. Even if one rejects a substantial soul, the thingliness of consciousness, and the objectivity of the person, ontologically one still posits something whose being retains the meaning of objective presence, whether explicitly or not” (114-115, translation by Joan Stambaugh).
4 Punishments and Rewards in the Afterlife

Then he mentions thereafter a rhetorical or dialectical argument by which he explains that the soul does not die. Then there is a story after that in which he describes the bliss and delight that await the souls of the happy and the just, and what awaits the souls of the tormented. We have made it known more than once that these stories are of no account, for the virtues that come about from them are not true virtues. (Averroes, *Epitome of Plato’s Republic*, on Book X)

The notion of postmortem rewards and penalties is often reckoned as one of Plato’s central tenets, one that links his metaphysics and theology with his moral and political philosophy. In several of Plato’s dialogues, Socrates relates “myths” concerning the afterlife that adapt various strands of popular belief to form a picture at least *prima facie* similar to—though also importantly different from—later Christian teachings about heaven and hell. Since it is the soul that is described as experiencing this recompense, it must continue to exist after death. The doctrine of psychic immortality thus provides this picture with a necessary philosophical underpinning.

Punishment even in this life is of course very controversial with respect to its origins, function, effectiveness, and moral justifiability; Plato himself made an important contribution to later debates about punishment in a civic context as the first thinker to systematically articulate the idea that it has a *corrective* function.\(^2\) Postmortem punishment inherits, sometimes in more pressing form, all the problems and questions related to punishment in the here and now. It is not my purpose here to systematically discuss these problems, although

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\(^1\)Translation from Lerner 2005, 148.  
\(^2\)Basic questions about punishment are raised in a critical and engaging way, with reference to a comparative historical context, in Burkert 2009. It is beyond my scope here to explore the connections and points of difference between Plato and contemporary philosophical work on punishment; for a survey of the latter, cf. Bedau and Kelly 2010.
they will be relevant to some of what follows. In this chapter, I aim rather to address an obvious objection to the position that the Platonic doctrine of the immortality of the soul is best understood as a this-worldly doctrine about human nature. Does not Plato’s apparent belief in rewards and punishments in the afterlife demand a literal, temporal interpretation of the soul’s immortality?

A preliminary response to this objection begins from the fact that Plato holds a radically inequalitarian view of morality, according to which different social groups inevitably have (and indeed should have) higher or lower objects of moral aspiration. The notion of punishments and rewards in the afterlife is not one that Plato seriously endorses: rather, he puts it forward only faute de mieux, as a salutary teaching aimed at certain social groups. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Plato’s characters speak about the afterlife mainly by means “myth” (μυθος, henceforth muthos), which Plato opposes in various ways to properly philosophical discourse. Plato’s myths of the afterlife are thus rhetorical devices designed to provide the unphilosophic with an incentive to virtuous behavior. Additionally, he stresses that myths can irrevocably shape the moral perspectives of children, who cannot evaluate them rationally (in the way that they may yet do as adults).

The above picture, although substantively correct and certainly fundamental to my interpretation, is also incomplete. Three related problems are particularly salient, which this chapter will address:

1. Within the dramatic frame of Plato’s dialogues, the myths of the afterlife are directed not towards the common masses but rather towards (adult) interlocutors with substantial philosophic aptitude; such people are presumably also an important reading audience of the dialogues as texts. In fact, Plato seems in general much less concerned

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3For general treatments of Plato on punishment see Mackenzie 1981 and Saunders 1991. Both focus on the civic content but include discussions of the afterlife myths.

4No one, I think, would challenge this claim with respect to the dialogues allegedly dating from the middle of Plato’s career, e.g. the Phaedo and the Republic, but it is more controversial with respect to the allegedly early and late dialogues. My analysis in what follows will aim to show in what respect this claim is true of the Gorgias and (pace Bobonich 2002) the Laws.

5The literature on Platonic myth is enormous. The classic treatment of Frutiger 1930 is very dated; see now Morgan 2000; Janka and Schäfer 2002; Partenie 2009; Collobert et al. 2012.
with the moral education of common non-philosophers than with potentially philosophic members of the elite like Callicles, Glaucon, or Alcibiades. What, if any, role do the myths of the afterlife have to play in the education of such people?

2. Sometimes with a view to solving this first problem, philosophical interpreters ancient and modern have frequently rejected or doubted the “literal” truth of Plato’s myths, but nonetheless adopted what might be called a *compatibilist* view of their content, according to which the myths either illustrate or offer further support for Plato’s basic ethical convictions or extend. Against such views, I will argue that the content of the myths are in several important respects in tension with ethical ideas found elsewhere in the dialogues. First of all, the notion of punishment operative in the myths does not appear to be purely or even primarily corrective. More importantly, any incentive based on the fear of postmortem retribution seems to conflict with what Plato says about the nature of true virtue.

3. What I have said so far might seem to imply a simple, binary opposition between mythical rhetoric and philosophical argument, with the latter holding some superior status. But this is not really true to Plato’s form of writing. Despite what Socrates and other characters sometimes say, this opposition proves to be very porous and unstable in the dialogues. Especially if (as I claim) the myths are *not* continuous in terms of their message with the dialectical arguments, the relationship between the two forms of discourse needs to be reassessed.

Although addressing these issues will sometimes take us apparently rather far afield from the main theme of this work, the discussion will always be in service of an interpretation of Plato’s myths of the afterlife that does not demand a literal view of psychic immortality. Ultimately, it should also reveal something important about Plato’s conception of philosophy itself.

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6The nature of the problem is recognized and stated with rare clarity by Smith 1986, although her solution is overly optimistic and superficial.
A brief overview of the textual data is in order. Plato’s best-known myths of the afterlife are found at the conclusion of the *Gorgias* and the *Republic* and near the end of the *Phaedo*, along with shorter descriptions in the *Phaedrus* (248e-249b) and in *Laws* X (903a-905d). These texts do not present anything like one consistent picture, although there are some recurring elements, notably the emphasis of rewards and punishments. The most complicated scheme of judgment and penalties, involving several different gradations, is found in the *Phaedo* (113d-114d). The *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* all allude to some incurably bad souls whose punishment will be eternal, but for most souls the rewards or punishments seem to be limited in time; in the *Republic*, for instance, their length is specified at one thousand years (615a-b). Great emphasis is placed in the *Republic* on the reincarnation of souls in human or animal bodies in an apparently eternal cycle; reincarnation also appears in the *Phaedrus* and the *Laws*, in the former with the possibility of escape from the cycle. By contrast, reincarnation is not mentioned in the *Gorgias* at all and is only alluded to in the *Phaedo*. The myths of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* include much detail of a “scientific” (or pseudo-scientific) nature, for instance the description of the earth’s surface and subterranean rivers in the *Phaedo* (110b-113c) or of the cosmic spindle in the *Republic* (616b-617b).

As we have already seen in the past chapter (and will continue to see in the next), myth and mythic imagery function in a very diverse range of ways in Plato’s texts. In this chapter, I make no effort to account for all the uses of myth in Plato in general, or even of all the features of his afterlife myths, each of which is a complex and subtle literary creation. I am interested in the descriptions of the afterlife qua vehicles for the idea of postmortem rewards and punishments and in the implications of this idea within the context of Plato’s philosophy. Additionally, although my analysis is meant to apply to all of Plato’s myths of the afterlife, for reasons of space I will focus on just two, that of the *Gorgias* and that of the *Laws*—the latter an extremely important and anomalous text, often not included in treatments of Plato on the afterlife at all. Thought to have been written relatively early

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Footnotes:

7 Thought to have been written relatively early.
and very late in Plato’s career, respectively, these two dialogues share many common themes (e.g. persuasion and punishment in a civic context) but also show important differences in the way myth is employed.

This chapter is organized in four sections. The first two will offer some more preliminary background. In the first, I examine the critique of traditional Greek conceptions of the afterlife and morality offered by Adeimantus in the second book of the Republic. The second section discusses the ancient reception of Platonic myth, in particular a critique from the Epicureans and the defense offered in the commentary on the Gorgias by the late Platonist Olympiodorus. The three problems raised above will be shown to arise out of this ancient debate. The myths of the Gorgias and the Laws will be the subjects of the third and fourth sections of this chapter, respectively. The discussion of the Gorgias will also provide a natural occasion for a treatment of the meaning of the term muthos itself throughout Plato’s works.

4.1 Morality and the afterlife in Republic II

The notion of postmortem punishments is brought up early on in the Republic, when the elderly Cephalus tells Socrates that in old age “the stories (muthoi) that are told about the things in Hades, that one who does injustice here must pay the penalty there, so long laughed at, begin to torment the soul, lest they be true” (330d). The type of belief that Cephalus here vaguely alludes to was in fact a somewhat secondary element of the religion of the day. To the extent that we have evidence for it, the early Greek tradition does not make rewards and punishments for virtue a central feature of postmortem existence. In the Homeric epics, for most people there is nothing distinguished about being in Hades, a drab realm of shades; only a few individuals receive special treatment, good or bad. By the fifth

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\(^8\)Tityus, Tantalus, and Sisyphus are tortured in Hades (Odyssey XI.576-600), but all three have committed crimes personally targeting the gods. Menelaus meanwhile will go to the “Elysian plain” (the toponym occurs only here in literary texts prior to the Hellenistic period) where “life is easiest for human beings”—but simply because he is the son-in-law of Zeus (Odyssey IV.563-568). Achilles, Ajax, and Agamemnon—all at least the equals of Menelaus as heroes—are meanwhile relegated to the normal underworld. Similarly for Hesiod, the “Isles of the Blessed” are the general destination for the entire race of heroes (Works and Days 170-173).
century BCE, there are isolated pieces of evidence for the notion of a general judgment after
death on a moral basis, often connected with Orphic and Pythagorean ideas, but belief in
an afterlife seems ultimately to have had limited influence in classical Athens.

Whether or not his beliefs about the afterlife would have fallen within the Athenian
mainstream, Cephalus functions in general in the Republic as a representative of received
popular morality and traditional piety (a framework propagated by poets like Pindar, whom
Cephalus quotes). As such, he is clearly presented as neither a moral disaster nor a moral
ideal. His concern with justice is real, but is grounded in self-interested concern about the
afterlife and involves heavy emphasis on making sacrifices to the gods. Rather than allow
Socrates to examine his implicit conception of the just, he flees the scene in order to attend
to some sacrifices, leaving philosophy to the younger generation.

The cultural framework in which Cephalus operates will come under attack at the begin-
nung of the second book of the Republic. Here Plato’s brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus offer
a pair of long speeches posing a challenge for Socrates. Glaucon, speaking first, asks Socrates
to show that justice by itself is beneficial to the soul of the just person, without regard for
any external consequences or incentives (358b-362c). Most people, Glaucon claims, value
justice only for its consequences, rejecting injustice only in deference to a social contract
whereby they avoid suffering injustice from others. On this view, doing injustice is naturally
attractive and beneficial to human beings, such that in the absence of law and convention
injustice would be chosen by everyone. Within this conventional system, moreover, the un-
just man who succeeds in acquiring a reputation for justice will prosper, while the one who
is in fact just but seems unjust will suffer the worst possible consequences.

9In Pindar’s Olympian 2 (ca. 476 BCE) “someone under the earth judges the crimes in this realm of
Zeus, giving a verdict with hateful necessity,” while “the good receive a less toilsome life” (56-62). Likewise,
in the Suppliants of Aeschylus (performed ca. 470), Danaus says (with reference to those who would force
the marriage of his daughters) that “not even in Hades after death will he escape the blame for these profane
actions he has done. For there, as is said (ὡς λόγος), another Zeus judges infractions” (228-231). For more
10Cf. Dover 1974, 261-268, who considers primarily the evidence of the orators.
The speech of Adeimantus has a somewhat different emphasis (362d-367e). Adeimantus criticizes the way in which social forces—in particular, poetry—promote justice in an inadequate manner, which in fact ends up encouraging injustice among some people. In other words, while Glaucon presents a view (attributed to unnamed others) on which culture supports justice against nature, Adeimantus (apparently speaking his own mind) attacks the morally ambivalent messages from culture as the source of the problem. Moreover, while Glaucon in his speech brings up the gods only as an afterthought (362c) and does not mention piety or the afterlife at all, Adeimantus assigns these things central importance.

Adeimantus blames people in general, and poets in particular, for not praising justice itself, but rather the consequences that flow from it, like a good reputation in the community and good favor from the gods (363a, cf. 366e). With regard to the latter, Adeimantus disapprovingly cites passages from Homer and Hesiod where the gods are said to reward the just with prosperity in this life. He then turns to divine rewards in the afterlife:

"Musaeus and his son[11] give the just even sillier things[12] from the gods: they take them to Hades in their poetry and have them recline wearing crowns at a drinking party for the pious, making them spend the whole of time getting drunk, considering eternal intoxication to be the finest wage for virtue. Others stretch out still greater wages from the gods. For they say that the pious man who keeps oaths leaves grandchildren and a line after him. In these and others ways they praise justice. They bury the impious and the unjust in mud in Hades and make them carry water in a sieve, while giving them bad reputations while still alive. The punishments (τιμωρήματα) that Glaucon just described for those who are just but seem unjust, these they attribute to the unjust. They have nothing else." (363c-e)

Rewards for just or pious behavior are seen as wages (μισθοί), payment for services rendered to the divine—thus an external consequence, not a direct benefit of justice itself to the soul of the individual. These wages are all paid in one currency, so to speak: the punishments in the afterlife are presented by the poets as closely continuous with and not qualitatively different from the supposed bad consequences of injustice in this life.

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[11] The poets that Adeimantus here refers to in a disapproving light (Musaeus and others) are connected with Orphism. Cf. Diogenes Laertius I.3-4. The son of Musaeus that Adeimantus refers to is often said to be Eumolpus, but other sources reverse the relationship and make Eumolpus the father.

[12] The word νεανικώτερα is hard to translate; it seems to refer to things that would appeal to young men.
Adeimantus next accuses the poets of elsewhere seriously contradicting this view of the gods as concerned to reward human virtue at all (364b-365a). According to the poets, the gods in fact allow many good people to suffer, while often rewarding the bad, all in an apparently arbitrary way. The poets moreover frequently claim that the gods can be persuaded and manipulated by the counterfeit service of sacrifice and prayer, such that divine favor and disfavor are not dependent on virtuous behavior at all.

Crucially, Adeimantus appears to object to this whole picture propagated by poets on pragmatic grounds—that is, with regard to its social consequences, rather than, say, out of genuine theological conviction. Given what the poets claim, why should it not occur to some to try to acquire a reputation for justice while secretly practicing injustice? “What do we think that the souls of the young who hear all this will do,” he asks Socrates, “those who are naturally bright and able, as if flitting over all the things that are said, to reason out on the basis of them what sort of person to be and how to proceed in order to go through life in the best way?” (365a-b). Adeimantus is not concerned here primarily with popular morality—i.e. with the effect of the poetic tradition on the behavior of the common masses or on people like Cephalus, for whom the poetic stories appear effective enough—but rather with what reflections it might incite in an intellectual young man (not so different, perhaps, from Glaucon or Adeimantus himself).

Reading between the lines of the poets’ praise of justice, this young man reasons that the path to happiness is to seem just while actually being unjust, a feat that will require cultivating the arts of persuasion as well as perhaps using violent force (365b-d). Adeimantus next creates an imaginary interlocutor who objects that “it’s not possible to escape the notice of or use force on the gods.” The young man responds:

“‘But if the gods don’t exist or if the affairs of human beings don’t matter to them, why should we bother about escaping their notice? If they do exist and care for us, we only know or have heard about them from the laws or from the poets who have written genealogies, and these say that the gods are such as to be turned aside, persuaded by sacrifices and ‘gentle prayers’ and dedicatory offerings. We must be persuaded by the poets either about both or about neither. If we must be persuaded, then we should commit injustice and atone for the injustice with sacrifices. If we are just, we will only
escape punishment from the gods, but we will lose the gains of injustice. If we are unjust, we will have the gains, and if we make supplication after having transgressed and done wrong, by persuading the gods we will be released without punishment.”

(365d-366a)

The interlocutor weakly responds that there will be still be punishment in Hades, but the young man replies that this will be taken care of through participation in cultic rites. The young man has in effect posed a trilemma: the gods either [1] do not exist, [2] exist but do not care about humans, or [3] exist and care but are easily swayed by prayers and offerings. The apparently random and amoral character of events in the world would seem to support [1] or [2]. The only evidence to the contrary is supplied by the revelation contained in the poetic tradition, in particular in its accounts of the afterlife. Yet while the poets oppose [1] and [2], they strongly support [3]. Whichever of the three options is true, secret injustice combined with an outward façade of justice and perhaps also religious observances will be the best course of action.

That Plato takes the problem articulated here by Adeimantus seriously is confirmed by parallels from the tenth book of the Laws (to be dealt with later in this chapter, cf. §4.4). Here the Athenian Stranger traces the roots of impiety, which he views as a serious threat to the stability of the political community, to three allegedly erroneous theological beliefs that he undertakes to refute: that the gods do not exist, that they exist but do not care for human beings, and that they can be persuaded by sacrifices and prayers (884b). In effect, the Stranger argues that the trilemma posed by Adeimantus in the Republic is a false one: there is a fourth option, namely that the gods exist, care for human beings (in the sense of meting out rewards and punishments based on moral behavior), and are impervious to counterfeit service and private petitions. The parallel is reinforced by the fact that the Athenian addresses the proponent of the first two views as a “young man” (888a, 900c).

Socrates in the Republic also takes Adeimantus’s challenge seriously. Fittingly, it is not with Glaucon but with Adeimantus—the champion of the power of culture to shape human

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13 Plato’s unremitting hostility to the third erroneous view shows that he is hardly an uncritical enthusiast or apologist for Orphism or the mystery cults, for which such cultic observances were of central importance.
nature—that Socrates examines the question of the education of the guardians in the ideal city later in the second book of the *Republic*. The earliest education of the future ruling elite will take place through *muthoi*, which, Socrates says, are *logoi* that are “on the whole false, though they have true things in them” (377a). In thinking about the suitability of myths, Socrates clearly shares the pragmatic perspective of Adeimantus: the stories to be told will be selected for how they foster virtue, not for whatever truth they may or may not contain. In fact Socrates earlier emphasized that morally harmful myths should not be told even if they *were* true (378a). A crucial passage for our purposes is the following:

> “If we are ever going to somehow persuade [the future guardians] that no citizen was ever an enemy to another, nor would this be pious, things to this effect must be said to children right away by old men and women, and poets must be compelled to make speeches similar to these to them when they are older. But Hera being chained up by her son, and Hephaestus being thrown down by his father when he was trying to defend his mother from being beaten, and the battles between gods described by Homer—these must not be admitted into the city, whether they were made with deeper meanings (*ἐν ὑπονοίαις*) or without them. For a youth is not able to tell what is the deeper meaning and what is not, but the things that someone of that age incorporates into their opinions tend to become hard to wash out or change. For which reason, perhaps, we must do everything so that the first things they hear are stories told (*μεμυθολογημένα*) in the finest possible way to hear with regard to virtue.” (378c-e)

Here Socrates shows himself to be aware of the possibility of allegorical content in myths, whereby stories might have a salutary moral beneath a problematic surface, but dismisses this as a factor relevant to their civic role. The reason for this is simple: those who are of a sort to be most influenced by myths (notably children) will pay attention to the surface and miss any deeper meaning.

Interestingly, the kinds of myths sketched by Socrates as suitable for telling in the ideal city do not prominently feature the afterlife. In the third book of the *Republic*, he does criticize Homer for portraying the afterlife as dreary or fearsome for everyone, saying that such passages encourage a cowardly fear of death (386a-387c). Socrates certainly does not call for the poets to deny that there is any kind of afterlife, and indeed he hints that the poets must praise Hades instead. But he himself only points out passages to be deleted,
giving no positive guidelines; in particular, he does not suggest that the poets describe any kind of postmortem moral judgment.

This choice by Socrates to avoid relying on postmortem rewards and punishments accords with how Plato’s brothers want to see justice praised, namely as something desirable and beneficial on its own by itself in the soul, even if it escapes the notice of both other human beings and the gods (cf. 366e). Adeimantus has further suggested, plausibly, that rewards and punishments in the afterlife are merely an extension of and commensurable with the social benefits of justice or the appearance thereof in this life. Now Socrates is not himself committed to denying that justice is valuable for its external, contingent consequences; on the contrary, he says that justice is to be chosen “both on account of itself and for the things that come about from it” (358). But if Socrates can successfully answer the brothers’ challenge, then the external consequences can be treated as strictly speaking superfluous for those confronted with the choice of justice or injustice. The guardians of his ideal city are intended to exemplify an attachment to justice that is not contingent on wages of any sort—either those provided by the community in the here and now or by the gods in an afterlife.

4.2 Mythic discourse in Plato: the Epicurean criticism and the Platonist defense

Having made these preliminary observations concerning Plato’s way of thinking about the role of myth in a civic context, we can now turn to the related but importantly distinct question of how mythic discourse functions within his own dialogues as pieces of philosophical writing. Unlike the future guardians of the ideal city in the Republic, Socrates’ interlocutors are often treated to myths of the afterlife where rewards and punishments play a prominent role. This feature of Plato’s works was taken very seriously by the Platonists. We possess detailed Platonist commentaries on all three major Platonic myths of the afterlife: on the Republic by Proclus, on the Phaedo by Damascius, and on the Gorgias by Olympiodorus. Unsurprisingly, Plato’s use of myth also attracted the attention of his ancient opponents,
notably the Epicureans, to whom the Platonists were concerned to respond. In this section, I will use this ancient debate as a basis for discussing the afterlife myths found in the *Gorgias* and the *Laws*. Many aspects of the Platonist defense of Plato’s myths are still tacitly accepted by commentators today; I will suggest that answering the Epicurean critique in fact requires a radically different response.

The Epicurean hostility to beliefs about the afterlife was well known. Seneca, writing from a Stoic perspective, says the following in one of his letters to Lucilius:

> I’m not so foolish as to go through the whole Epicurean song-and-dance here, and say that fears of the underworld are pointless (*vanos esse inferorum metus*), that Ixion is not turned on his wheel, that Sisyphus does not push his rock uphill on his shoulders, that no one’s innards can be regenerated and picked away daily. No one is such a child as to fear Cerberus and the darkness and the ghostly garb of those held together from naked bones. Death either devours or strips us. If we are released, then the better parts remain with the burden lifted, while for those who are devoured nothing remains: both good and bad things have been removed. (*Epistle* 24.18)

In declining to elaborate on the Epicurean objections to traditional stories about the afterlife as impossible or ridiculous, Seneca is not saying that these objections are wrong, but rather that they are banal and obvious. Seneca himself is agnostic about whether there is an afterlife at all, but strikingly rules out the possibility that it would involve punishment or other evils.

One of the disciples of Epicurus, Colotes, developed more sophisticated criticisms targeting Plato’s use of myth in particular. Three of his criticisms are preserved for us by Proclus in his commentary on the *Republic*.\[14\]

> The Epicurean Colotes accuses Plato on the following grounds. [1] He abandons true knowledge (*τὴν ἀλήθειαν τὴν ἐπιστημονικὴν*) and deals with falsehood, telling stories (*μυθολογῶν*) like a poet rather than offering proofs (*ἀποδεικνύς*) like one who knows. [2] He contradicts himself, reviling the poets near the beginning of this work for making the things in Hades frightening to those who listen and engendering in them the fear of death, but then at the end he himself transforms the philosophical muse (*τὴν φιλόσοφον μοῦσαν*) into tragic story-telling (*τραγικὴν μυθολογίαν*) about the things in Hades. For as for the “roaring mouth” and the “fiery” and “savage” executioners of the tyrant and Tartarus and the other such things that he speaks of\[15\] has he not far surpassed the tragedians in excess? [3] Thirdly, it is necessary that *muthoi* of this sort

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\[14\] For discussion of the criticisms in the broader context of Colotes’s thought, see Kechagia 2011, 68-70.

\[15\] Here Colotes quotes *Republic* 615e-616a.
be basically pointless (πολὺ τὸ μάταιον ἔχειν). They are unsuitable for the many, who cannot understand them anyway, but they are useless for the wise, who do not need to become better through such terrors. So who are the stories written for? If they cannot say, they show that their own pursuit of story-telling is pointless. 16 (In rem publicam II.105.23-106.14 Kroll)

Why, Colotes demands, should Plato, who claims to be a philosopher and a lover of the truth, indulge in a form of discourse that is in some sense false, especially after his trenchant criticism of the poets precisely with regard to their portrayal of the afterlife as terrible? Particularly interesting is the third criticism, according to which Plato’s myths are not suitable for any audience and are thus pointless. They cannot be understood by ordinary people (Colotes does not say why not); the wise, on the other hand, do not need “to become better through such terrors” (ἀμείνοσιν ἐκ τῶν τοιῶν γίνεσθαι δειμάτων).

As an example of the Platonist response to such objections, we can take the discussion of the myth in the Gorgias in the commentary on the dialogue by Olympiodorus (Lectures 46-50), who prefixes his discussion with some comments on myth in general. 17 Although Olympiodorus does not mention Colotes or his criticisms specifically, similar concerns are nonetheless clearly on his mind.

For Olympiodorus, making myths is something that “the ancients” (οἱ παλαιοὶ) did (46.2.9), including both poets like Homer and philosophers like Plato. Against the first criticism of Colotes, whereby it is inappropriate for philosophers to dabble in mythic falsehood, Olympiodorus defines myth in general as a “false logos that gives an image of truth” (λόγος ψευδὴς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν, 46.3.3-4). One important example of how myth is false is that it introduces temporality where there really is none: myth “does not keep the things that always happen at the same time (τὰ ἅμα ὄντα ἀεί) at the same time, but divides them into earlier and later” (48.1.4-5). Olympiodorus also counts among the surface elements of Plato’s myths the portrayal of “punishments and rivers under the earth” (46.6.13-14), here

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16 Colotes shifts into the plural here, as if accusing Plato and his followers together.
17 Jackson et al. 1998 is an English translation of this work with notes. I follow the Teubner edition of the Greek text by William Norvin (1936). Line numbers are by page in Norvin’s edition, not necessarily within chapters.
alluding to the elaborate description of the underworld in the Phaedo. (Presumably Olympiodorus does not think that the disembodied, incorporeal soul actually goes under the earth at all.) How, then, are myths still supposed to be images of the truth? For Olympiodorus, it is because they contain two different levels: the surface, apparent meaning (τὸ φαινόμενον), which is false, and the truth that is “hidden in the depth” (ἐν βάθει κεκρυμμένον, 46.4.30-31)

Against Colotes’ second charge, that according to Plato himself the myths created by poets are morally damaging, Olympiodorus invokes a distinction between poetic and philosophic myth. Crucially, both types of myth have a false apparent meaning. The apparent meaning of a poetic myth (whereby, for instance, the different gods are in violent conflict with one another) is, according to Olympiodorus, patently ridiculous and unbelievable, motivating readers to seek out the hidden, allegorical truth. The young, however, who cannot understand allegory, will be deceived and harmed by the ridiculous surface of poetic myths. Philosophic myths rectify the latter problem: the surface meaning may sometimes be ridiculous (cf. 49.1.21-23), but it at least is never harmful to anyone. Paradoxically, this leads to the main disadvantage of philosophic myth, namely that there is no immediate incentive for an allegorical reading: “since their appearance does no harm, often we remain there and do not seek the truth” (46.6.17-18). This has the interesting implication that the philosophic myths included in Plato’s dialogues are not optimally suited for a philosophical readership.

The admission that the false but safe surface of philosophic myth can deter the search for truth adds more urgency to the first challenge of Colotes: why should philosophers resort to falsehood at all? Olympiodorus gives two (rather weak) reasons for this. First, the human soul includes an imaginative faculty (τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν φανταστικόν) that enjoys images and has been accustomed to myth since childhood (46.3). Second, myths allow us to “proceed from the appearances to the non-apparent” (46.2.11-30). In offering this second reason, Olympiodorus is not carving out a special epistemological domain of things that can only

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18Philosophic myths can contain some truth on the surface (49.1.1-2) and also arguments (ἀποδείξεις, 49.3.23-26, cf. 50.1.14).
be revealed through myth: rather, he is concerned that true doctrines not be approached rashly by non-philosophers.\textsuperscript{19}

For Olympiodorus the distinction between two levels of meaning in the myth thus corresponds to a distinction between two audiences with radically different intellectual aspirations or aptitudes. Such a distinction, between the non-philosophic majority and the “wise,” is also presumed in the third criticism of Colotes, who argues that Platonic myth is inappropriate for both groups. With regard to the common people, Olympiodorus seems to concede that they will not understand the real point of the myths. His defense is accordingly primarily a negative one: Platonic myth will not harm them. If the wise, i.e. philosophers, bother to seek out the hidden, allegorical truth in the myths, they will find something of special value to them (which non-philosophers ought not to see). In practice, however, Olympiodorus’ use of allegorical interpretation to discover the hidden significance of particular details is often arbitrary and bizarre.\textsuperscript{20}

Still, before deriding the Platonist approach, we should note that modern attempts to interpret Plato’s myths often tacitly rely on two of Olympiodorus’s main principles. First, although modern interpreters do not resort to allegorical interpretation of particular details, they do often hold that we can distinguish between the literal, surface meaning (which is clearly false or at least entirely unsubstantiated) and the “deeper” moral significance. The second is that the literal meaning is not harmful; while perhaps false, it at least accords with or illustrates the deeper, moral meaning. Thus Annas says about the \textit{Gorgias} myth:

\begin{quote}
The myth, then, is giving us a consequentialist reason to be just. Whether we take it as really threatening future punishment for wrongdoing, or demythologize its message as the claim that being wicked brings the punishment of a scarred and deformed soul
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19}The former reading might be suggested by Olympiodorus’s somewhat confusing comparison to how we infer the existence of soul from bodies (in general: τὰ ἀφανῆ ἐκ τῶν φανερῶν πιστοῦται καὶ τὰ ἁσώματα ἐκ τῶν σωμάτων, 46.2.16-17). But such inferences obviously do not require mythical presentation. Olympiodorus explains the real reason elsewhere: “Just as in temples the sacred instruments and mysteries have screens, so that the unworthy will not chance to see them, so here too myths are veils for doctrines, so that they are not naked and exposed to anyone who wants to look” (46.6.20-24).

\textsuperscript{20}For instance, he appears to interpret the fact that in the myth Zeus sets up Minos as a kind of appeals-judge over Rhadamanthus and Aiaacus as an allusion to the One and the Infinite Dyad (49.2).
now, its message is still that justice pays ‘in the end,’ on a deeper level than we can now see.  

For Annas the moral significance of the myth is to give us an incentive for virtuous behavior by suggesting that virtue is ultimately to our advantage. This, she claims, is the message found both on the surface of the myth and when it is “demythologized.” In the next section, I will argue with respect to the Gorgias that this is far from obviously being the case.

4.3 Punishment, virtue, and the afterlife in the Gorgias (523a-527e)

This section discusses the myth from the Gorgias in order to assess both its moral message and the coherence of this message with ethical principles expressed earlier in the dialogue and in Plato’s other works. The myth is the culmination of Socrates’s unsuccessful attempt to convince his interlocutor Callicles that the life of justice and philosophy is to be chosen over that of injustice and political power. It is the shortest of the afterlife myths in the Platonic dialogues. The way in which Socrates introduces it immediately raises the problem of its status: “Listen then, as they say, to a very fine logos,” Socrates says to Callicles, “which you, I think, will consider a muthos, but I consider a logos, since I will say what I am about to say as true” (523a).

To understand this perplexing introduction, we must briefly review much-discussed question of the meaning of the term muthos, which so far I have simply been translating (or transliterating) as “myth.” As we have seen, muthoi in the Republic are described by Socrates as “on the whole false.” In the earliest Greek texts, however, the word muthos has no pejorative connotation. For Homer (who uses the word logos only rarely) muthos means simply “speech,” especially marked, significant speech, backed by authority or tradition. By the time of Thucydides, however, the term had acquired more negative connotations: the

21 Annas 1982, 125.
22 Cf. similar views in Irwin 1979, 250 and Sedley 2009a, 67-68.
23 Cf. how, in a summary of the discussion in Book II later in the Republic (522a), Glaucos contrasts logoi that μυθώδεις with those that are ἀληθινῶτεροι.
24 Morgan 2000, 17-20 argues that an intrinsically pejorative sense of muthos cannot be found before Plato at all, but she seems to underestimate the negativity of how the word is used by Herodotus and Thucydides.
historian associates the mythical (τὸ μυθῶδες) with stories about the past that are unreliable or unbelievable, yet a popular source of pleasure (I.21-21).

Plato would appear to be drawing on such negative connotations when his Socrates applies the term *muthos* to his descriptions of the afterlife in the *Phaedo* (110b, 114d) and the *Republic* (621b), as well as to the Palinode in the *Phaedrus* (253c, 265c). That such applications of the term are in some way meaningful is confirmed by the fact that Plato can draw a sharp contrast between *muthos* and *logos*.

In addition to the opening of the myth in the *Gorgias*, in the *Phaedo* Socrates remarks that poets should make *muthous* but not *logous* (61b), while in the *Timaeus*, he (likely ironically) calls the story of Critias about the distant history of Athens “not a made-up *muthos* but a truthful *logos*” (26e). In the *Protagoras*, the sophist Protagoras offers his audience the choice of hearing either a *muthos* or a *logos*, hinting that the former would be more appropriate for “an old man speaking to younger ones” (320c); he ends up beginning with a *muthos* in narrative form as the “more charming” (χαριέστερον) option, before switching to a non-narrative, argumentative *logos*.

There are, however, no obvious formal features of the description of the afterlife in the *Gorgias* that would clearly differentiate it as a *logos* rather than a *muthos*, in contrast to Socrates’ other descriptions of the afterlife. The text in the *Gorgias* falls into three parts. In the first (523a-524a), Socrates relates a story that he claims to have “heard” somewhere, according to which it has always been the divine law that those who have lived justly and piously are sent to the Isles of the Blessed at the end of their earthly lives, while those who have lived unjustly and godlessly are sent to Tartarus. Under the reign of Kronos, however, humans were judged by other human judges while still alive, and the process was open to all the forms of abuse common to human judicial procedures. In response, Zeus instituted the postmortem judgment of human souls (stripped of bodies, possessions, and social positions)

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26 On the contrast in Greek thought in general, cf. Fowler 2011.
27 Protagoras announces that he is switching from *muthos* to *logos* at 324d (cf. 328c). Puzzlingly, however, the shift from narrative to argument already appears to have happened at 323a. This is a good illustration of how Plato’s appeals to a distinction between the two terms end up in fact calling it into question.
and installed his own sons (Minos, Rhadamanthus, and Aiacus) as expert judges. “These are the things that I, having heard, trust to be true,” Socrates then says, “and from these \textit{logoi} I reason (\textit{λογίζομαι}) that something like this follows” (524a-b). He then proceeds to elaborate on the moral significance of the story in a more argumentative style (524b-526d). Finally, after again emphasizing that he is “persuaded by these \textit{logoi}” (526d), he enters into a peroration exhorting Callicles to the life of virtue (526d-527e).

Given the valence of \textit{muthos-logos} contrast elsewhere, it is tempting to suppose that when Socrates stresses the status of all this as a \textit{logos}, he is emphasizing its truth or reliability (rather than its traditional status or popular appeal), or at least claiming that it belongs to the realm of what is in principle open to philosophical investigation and dispute. As he later says to Callicles:

“Maybe it seems to you that these things have been told as a \textit{muthos}, like an old woman would tell them, and you look down on them. There would be nothing crazy about looking down on them, if somehow by searching we could find things that are better and truer. But now you see that the three of you, you and Polus and \textit{Gorgias}, who are surely the wisest of the Greeks at present, cannot show that one should live any other life than this one [i.e. the just one], which is clearly beneficial there as well [i.e. in the afterlife]. But among so many \textit{logoi}, the others have been refuted and only this \textit{logos} stands still, that one must take more care to avoid doing than suffering injustice, and a man must above all practice being rather than seeming good, both in private and in public. But if someone becomes bad in some way, he must be punished, and this is the second best thing after being just, to become so and to pay the penalty by being punished.” (527a-c)

Since Callicles views \textit{muthoi} as worthless, Socrates claims that he is actually offering something more intellectually respectable: a \textit{logos} open to challenge and improvement, which moreover coheres with the \textit{logoi} about justice and punishment defended dialectically in the early portions of the dialogue. (This alleged coherence will be scrutinized shortly).

Socrates does at any rate twice claim that his \textit{logos} is true, but each time in a qualified way. The wording of his opening claim, “I will say what I am about to say as true” (\textit{ὡς ἀληθῆ γὰρ οὐτα σοι λέξω ἃ μέλλω λέγειν}, 523a), raises the question of what it means to say these things to Callicles as true. (Clearly it would be pointless to say them \textit{as false}.) He later says that he “trusts” the \textit{logoi} to be true (\textit{πιστεύω ἀληθῆ εἶναι}, 524a-b) and that he is
“persuaded” (πέπεισμαι) by them (526d). The choice of terminology is significant. Earlier in the *Gorgias*, Socrates described rhetoric as a practice of persuading people through long and potentially deceptive speeches that create trust (πίστις), which can be true or false, as opposed to learning or knowledge (454d-455a, cf. § 6.2). For Socrates to say that he “trusts” in the myth thus amounts to an implicit disavowal of knowledge.

Socrates moreover contrasted rhetoric with his own method of dialectical exchange through brief questions and answers, in which each statement is open to scrutiny and the interlocutor’s active assent is continually sought (cf. 449b-c, 471d). This opposition between dialogue and rhetoric as philosophical and non-philosophical forms of discourse can be aligned with that between logos and muthos.\(^\text{28}\) When Socrates finally retreats into a long myth to persuade Callicles, who here remains a silent auditor, it seems that he is engaging in the very kind of rhetoric that he earlier criticized. Read in the light of this earlier critique, Socrates’ attempt to assert the intellectual respectability of the description of the afterlife by insisting that it is a true logos looks disingenuous.

Paradoxically, however, the simple opposition between dialogue and rhetoric has already been fundamentally undermined in the *Gorgias*. Socrates in fact almost immediately abandons his initial scruples and makes use of lengthy speeches containing many complex ethical claims that are never cross-examined (cf. 464b-466a, 507c-509c, 511c-513c, 517b-519d). He also hints at the possibility of an ideal, scientific rhetoric that aims at what is best, rather than what is amenable, for the citizens of a community (503a-504e). Furthermore, the sections of the conversation where the formal criterion of dialectical exchange is maintained (e.g. in the refutation of Polus) seem in fact designed to illustrate how dialogue can be a very imperfect method for finding or teaching the truth, rather than merely defeating an interlocutor or revealing her flaws and biases.\(^\text{29}\) The *Gorgias* as a whole thus actually calls into serious question the ideal of pure philosophical discourse that Socrates sets out to defend.

\(^{28}\)In the *Statesman* (304d), it is agreed that rhetoric is said to involve persuading a crowd though μυθολογία rather than through teaching (διδαχή).

\(^{29}\)See the classic discussion of Kahn 1983.
The somewhat confusing use of the terms *muthos* and *logos* at the opening of the myth must be viewed in this light. Since the opposition in question is essentially unstable and porous, Socrates’ insistence that what he will say is a *logos* can itself be only a rhetorical device.\(^{30}\)

The unusual introduction of the description of the afterlife in the *Gorgias* thus should not be seen as seriously claiming for it a status radically different than that of Socrates’ other such descriptions (which he *does* describe as *muthoi*).

The philosophical credentials of the myth are also weakened by the fact that Socrates in the *Gorgias* never proves or even claims that the soul is immortal; the word ἀθάνατος does not occur in the myth.\(^{31}\) After defining death as “the dissolution (διάλυσις) of two things, the soul and the body, from one another” (524b), Socrates merely points out that the body is seen to retain its condition, including features like size, hair, and physical scars, “for a certain time” (ἐπί τινα χρόνον, 524d3). The soul, he claims, will likewise retain after its separation from the body “all the natural characteristics and the affections (τὰ παθήματα) that the human being has in his soul due to his various activities” (524d).

This comparison obviously presupposes that the soul itself will continue to exist after its separation from the body. Socrates may be making an implicit *a fortiori* argument based on his earlier claim that the soul is “more valuable” (τιμιώτερον) than the body (512a). If the body continues to exist after death, then the soul, which is more valuable, ought to as well. This argument, which resembles the end of the Affinity Argument in the *Phaedo* (cf. § 2.1), is of course bad: it is not only possible but in fact common for more valuable things to be much more easily destroyed than less valuable things. Even if we grant that the

\(^{30}\)Cf. the sly terminological insouciance of the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* when he refers, during his discussion the killing of blood relations (872d-873a), to the “*muthos* or *logos* or whatever one must call it (ἢ ὅτι χρὴ προσαγορεύειν αὐτόν) from ancient priests,” to the effect that one must become, in a future life, the victim of the same crime that one earlier committed.

\(^{31}\)McPherran 1996, 266-270 fails to see that the myth does not directly endorse immortality and thus needlessly spends much time worrying about whether it accurately represents what he takes to be the views of the historical Socrates (a dubious enterprise to begin with), whom he takes to have been agnostic on this point.

\(^{32}\)In the *Phaedo* death is called “the release (ἀπολλαγή) of the soul from the body” (64c). The shift from “dissolution” to “release” is significant; the formulation in the *Phaedo* stresses the liberating rather than the destructive power of death. The one occurrence of διάλυσις in the *Phaedo* comes in the objection of Simmias (88b), where the destructive aspect is to be stressed.
soul lasts longer than the body, the very analogy with the body seems to suggest that the soul is something durable, but ultimately corruptible.\textsuperscript{33} (This is in spite of the fact that, as we will see, Socrates later refers to punishments that last for all time for a select group of extremely evil souls.) Though Socrates may also simply be relying on the common Homeric conception of the afterlife, he in any case does not seem interested in supplying a rigorous philosophical underpinning for his myth.

The myth in any case explicitly models the judgment of souls in the afterlife on human judicial practices, with judges meting out punishment. Now justice and punishment in a civic context have been important themes throughout the \textit{Gorgias}. Notably, Socrates earlier scandalized his interlocutor Polus by defending the thesis that punishment in general is a corrective or therapeutic procedure, such that “the soul becomes better, if it is justly punished” (477a).\textsuperscript{34} In describing the postmortem judgment, Socrates accordingly presents the effects of vice on the soul as analogous to the effects of sickness and torture on the body (524e). Prior misfortune and bad health are of course not intuitively grounds for punishment, unless punishment is conceived of as a kind of cure, i.e. a good thing for the one punished. Socrates moreover insists, as we have seen, on the coherence of the description of the afterlife with the theses earlier given a dialectical defense, in particular “that one must take more care to avoid doing than suffering injustice” and that “if someone becomes bad in some way, he must be punished, and this is the second best thing after being just, to become so and to pay the penalty by being punished” (527b).

Despite this assurance, however, the myth is not obviously entirely compatible with the earlier view. There is first of all a terminological shift. In his earlier discussion with the

\textsuperscript{33}The treatment of the soul in the \textit{Gorgias} would thus have been very attractive to the Stoics. There is no hint at all that the soul is something incorporeal. For the notion of the soul’s temporary survival after death (ἐπί τινα χρόνον), compare Eusebius, \textit{Preparation for the Gospel} XV.20.6-7, citing Arius Didymus, according to whom the Stoics hold that the soul after death will ἐπιμένειν τινὰς χρόνους καθ’ ἑαυτήν.

\textsuperscript{34}Contrast the subtly but importantly different view of punishment that Plato puts in the mouth of the sophist Protagoras in the dialogue bearing his name, whereby punishment (at least punishment that is not totally irrational) is “for the sake of deterrence” (ἀποτροπῆς ἑνεκά), such that “neither [the criminal] himself nor someone else seeing him punished will commit injustice later” (324a-b). Punishment on this view could still perhaps be said to benefit the criminal, but in a much weaker sense than what Socrates seems to envision in the \textit{Gorgias}, where the term ἀποτροπῆ does not occur.
Polus Socrates most frequently refers to punishment using the verb κολάζειν and related terms; these appear only twice in the myth, in the summary of earlier conclusions just cited (527b-c). Instead, Socrates now prefers τιμωρεῖν and derivatives, which have a stronger retributive connotation (suggesting “vengeance” and in general a connection with “honor,” τιμή). Socrates then more explicitly departs from his earlier view when he introduces the notion of a select group of souls who are incurably evil, i.e. not susceptible to reform through punishment:

“It belongs to everyone who is in punishment (ἐν τιμωρίᾳ), when they are punished correctly (ὀρθῶς τιμωρουμένῳ) by someone else, either to become better and be benefited or to become an example (παραδείγματι), so that others, seeing them suffer what they suffer might become better through fear (φοβούμενοι βελτίων γίγνονται). The ones who are benefited and who pay the penalty at the hands of both gods and men are those who committed curable crimes (ἰάσιμα ἁμαρτήματα). Still, the benefit comes about for them both here and in Hades through pains and sufferings, for there is no other way to be released from injustice. But those who have done the utmost injustices and through such things become incurable, from these examples come about, and they themselves are no longer benefited, as they are incurable, but others are benefited who see them suffering on account of their crimes the greatest and most painful and most fearful sufferings for all time (τὸν ἀεί χρόνον), simply hung up as warnings there in the prison in Hades, spectacles and warnings to those of the unjust who arrive there.” (525b-c)

Socrates did allude in the earlier conversation with Polus to the possibility of a soul becoming “incurable” through injustice (480a-b), but not to the possibility that punishment for some people could serve a strictly deterrent function by giving an example to others. If punishment for incurables does not benefit the incurables themselves, then the thesis that Socrates maintains against Polus—that it is always better for the wicked to undergo just punishment than to escape it—does not hold. In fact it will be precisely those who have committed the most extreme injustices who ought to try to escape punishment even here on earth (for if they cannot be benefited by the divine punishments of the underworld, then they hardly will be by mere human ones). It is no help to claim that the punishment of incurables

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35 Words derived from τιμωρεῖν appear four times in the myth and only twice elsewhere in the dialogue (cf. 472d-e). Cf. Sedley 2009, 62n16 and Irwin 1979, 244.

36 This inconsistency is discussed by Irwin 1979, 245. Mackenzie 1981, 230 concludes, on a basis of all Plato’s myths, that “punishment in the eschatology is certainly not reformatory.”
is still in a way beneficial, in that their example benefits others\textsuperscript{37} as this would preserve Socrates’ claim in a merely verbal way. A further problem is that the example made out of the incurables in the underworld would seem to come too late to serve as a deterrent to unjust people in this life and encourage them to reform themselves; this led Dodds to think that the doctrine of reincarnation is silently presupposed\textsuperscript{38} Yet Socrates in the \textit{Gorgias} (in agreement with the Homeric picture) does not posit anything of the sort.

Incurable souls subject to eternal punishment are in fact a standard feature of how Plato describes the afterlife, appearing in the myths in the \textit{Phaedo} (113e) and the \textit{Republic} (615e) as well. The Platonist commentators are scandalized by this notion of eternal punishment, both because it is inconsistent with the corrective theory of punishment and on general theological grounds, in that it offends against the providential ordering of nature. Olympiodorus does not mince words:

\begin{quote}
We are not punished forever (οὐκ ἀεὶ κολαζόμεθα). It is better to say that the soul is corruptible than to hold this. If the soul is punished forever and never enjoys goodness, it is always in a condition of badness (ἐν κακίᾳ). Yet punishment aims at some good. [The soul] must not always be in a condition contrary to nature, but rather progress towards what is in accord with nature. If punishment neither benefits us nor brings us toward what is better, it has come about in vain (μάτην). But neither the god nor nature does anything in vain. (\textit{In Gorgiam} 50.2.23-30)
\end{quote}

Olympiodorus accordingly resorts to his allegorical fantasies and lamely suggests that by “forever” (ἀεὶ) Plato \textit{really} means just the length of one συναποκατάστασις, i.e. the time it takes for the stars to return to the same position relative to each other (50.3). Since then no souls will remain in a condition of vice forever, all punishment in the afterlife can be seen as effectively corrective. Damascius, commenting on the punishment of incurables in the \textit{Phaedo}, offers several different solutions, including, first, that “this is a lie for political purposes (πολιτικῶς ἔψευσται), so that souls will take care about incurable offenses” (\textit{In Phaedonem} II 147). This suggestion seems correct: the claim that some postmortem punishments are eternal is intended as a deterrent based on fear for those alive now.

\textsuperscript{37}So Irwin 1979, 246 and Annas 1982, 124.\textsuperscript{38}Dodds 1959, 381.
We can now return to Annas’s view that the purpose of the myth is to provide (both on the surface and on a deeper level) “a consequentialist reason to be just.” The reason in question must be that we want to avoid punishment. For this incentive to be effective, punishment must be, or at least be viewed as, something bad. This is indeed implied by how Socrates introduces the entire myth: “No one fears death itself, unless they are completely irrational and unmanly, but rather doing injustice, since for the soul to arrive in Hades brimming with many unjust deeds is the most extreme of all evils” (522e).\textsuperscript{39} The second part of this sentence seems to be in stark conflict with Socrates’ earlier claims about punishment. If just punishment is really beneficial, then going to a place where it is inevitable cannot be the worst of all evils. Unjust souls ought rather to \textit{look forward} to the therapeutic treatment that they will receive in the afterlife.

Of course it can be perfectly reasonable to fear something even while knowing that it is beneficial—for instance, painful surgery. In the case of the incurably evil, of course, this analogy with medicine does not hold, as their punishment does not ultimately benefit them. Moreover, if someone were to, say, quit smoking for fear of having to undergo painful but beneficial surgery, such a person would ultimately not be motivated by an abstract commitment to health above all else. This may again seem to be a perfectly unobjectionable way to think about \textit{health}, but when translated back into moral terms such a position—that the ultimate settling of accounts in the afterlife makes the avoidance of injustice in the here and now a matter of prudence—seems to be in tension with Socrates’ position in the \textit{Apology}, where he makes the supreme importance of care for the soul, rather than anything

\textsuperscript{39}Olympiodorus seems aware of a problem here and hints at an allegorical reading: “the most extreme evil is for the human being to die brimming with many unjust deeds in his soul” (\textit{In Gorgiam} 45.10). The point would be that the “worst evil” is not “to arrive in Hades” to be punished, as Socrates says, but rather merely to reach the end of one’s life in a condition of extreme vice from which one could no longer escape. On Socrates’ view it is of course entirely appropriate to fear becoming extremely vicious. It is also possible that Socrates’ remark is meant to refer to incurables, but they have not yet been introduced, and it is surely possible to commit many unjust deeds and still be able to be cured through punishment.
that happens in the afterlife (about the existence of which he remains agnostic), the basis for his claim about the superiority of suffering injustice to committing it.

Likewise, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates prefaces his myth of postmortem judgment with an explanation that the immortality of the soul is a doctrine with ethical relevance precisely because virtue and vice are rewards and punishments in themselves:

“But it is just to think, men, that the soul, if indeed it is immortal, needs care (ἐπιμελείας) not just only for this time that we call ‘life,’ but for the whole of time, and the risk would now seem to be terrible, if one will not care for it. For if death was a release from everything, it would be a gift for the bad when they die to be released at once from the body and also from their own vice in the soul. But since the soul is evidently immortal, there is no other flight from evils nor salvation save becoming as good and intelligent as possible. For the soul comes to Hades having nothing besides its education and way of living, which are said most of all to benefit or harm the one who will die right at the beginning of their journey over there.” (107c-d)

As in the *Apology*, the soul needs care, amounting to the cultivation of virtue, *simply because the soul is a valuable thing*. Literal immortality still has a role on this view: if for the soul to be in a condition of vice is intrinsically bad, then eternal existence in a state of vice would be infinitely worse. What is not invoked here is any kind of externally imposed punishment in the afterlife. The basic message about the need to care for the soul moreover stands whether the soul is literally immortal or not.

The incentive to virtue that is added by the myths—that of avoiding painful, possibly eternal punishment in the afterlife—may be more psychologically effective than Socrates’ abstract exhortations, but is thus also strictly speaking redundant. It introduces into considerations of justice precisely the kind of external consequences deplored by Glaucon

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40 Contrast the message of deterrence made explicit in the likely pseudo-Platonic *Seventh Letter*, where postmortem punishment is used to ground the principle that it is worse to do than suffer wrong: “One must always be really persuaded by the ancient and sacred accounts, which claim that our soul is immortal and has judges and pays the greatest penalties (τίνειν τὰς μεγίστας τιμωρίας) whenever it is released from the body. Therefore one must consider it a smaller evil to suffer than to perform great crimes and injustices” (335a).

41 Cf. Sedley 2009a, 51: “if the ultimate reason for living morally is the threat of hell, as the myth appears to preach, the dialogue’s profound philosophical argument for the intrinsic preferability of justice to injustice verges on redundancy.” I do not really know what “profound philosophical argument” Sedley is referring to, at least in the *Gorgias* (474c-475e does not merit this description).
and Adeimantus in the *Republic*. Now perhaps one might reply (especially in view of the direct juxtaposition in the *Phaedo* of the remarks just quoted with the myth) that this redundancy need not be a problem. It is in fact very convenient that a moral motivation (the intrinsic value of a virtuous soul) and a non-moral motivation (rewards and punishments in the afterlife) coincide and support each other. Does not Socrates in the *Republic* place justice in the class of goods valued both for themselves and for their consequences (358a)?

But the problem in fact runs deeper than mere redundancy. If people are, as the myth in the *Gorgias* suggests, to “become better through fear,” i.e. be morally improved by being afraid of a painful penalty, this would imply that they cultivate the habit of choosing their actions so as to avoid future pain and gain future pleasure and in this way shape their entire lives. What this model would end up encouraging, morally speaking, would thus be little more than a prudent, long-term hedonism. Socrates is, by the way, clear that the punishments in the afterlife are painful in a way commensurable with the pains of this life: “the benefit comes about both here and in Hades through pains and sufferings” (525b). But earlier in the *Gorgias* Socrates has refuted Callicles’s view that the good is pleasure (494e-499b). The positing of rewards and punishments (i.e. pleasures and pains) in the afterlife as a guiding incentive for how we live now thus reflects an ultimately Calliclean rather than Socratic perspective. Why would Plato have Socrates tell such a myth?

One answer is suggested in a well-known but difficult passage in the *Phaedo* (68c-69c). Here Socrates insists that only philosophers truly possess the virtues of courage (ἀνδρεία) and moderation (σωφροσύνη). In ordinary usage, courage is taken to refer to the disposition of standing firm in the face of evils and death, moderation to that of not being carried away by bodily desires but rather holding them in low regard (68c-d). As for these dispositions, Socrates claims that philosophers exhibit them more than anyone else, but admits that non-philosophers sometimes do as well. The difference between these sorts of disposition and the

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42Socrates in the *Gorgias* does seem concerned to rule out the possibility that the judges in the underworld could be bribed or otherwise swayed by non-moral considerations—part of the poetic teaching that concerned Adeimantus.
true philosophical virtues lies in their ultimate aims. Philosophers, in all of their actions, aim at “intelligence” (φρόνησις), while most people act only on the basis of a calculus of pleasures and pains. Non-philosophers thus stand up to death only when they fear that something even worse (i.e. more painful) will happen, and restrain themselves from certain pleasures only to avoid being deprived of other pleasures later (68d-e). The result is that their kind of virtue, based on a calculating, long-term hedonism, is “a shadow painting” and “slave-like, with nothing healthy or true about it” (69b).

Later in the *Phaedo*, however, Socrates seems to take a slightly more positive attitude towards non-philosophical virtue. He says that the happiest among non-philosophers are those who “practiced popular and political virtue (τὴν δημοτικὴν καὶ πολιτικὴν ἀρετήν), which they call moderation and justice, which has come about from habit and practice, without philosophy or intellect” (82a-b). The wording suggests that this is the same as or at least similar to the slave-like virtue that was criticized before, but it now appears that even this deficient virtue is better than nothing for those who are not capable of a philosophical life, at least from the point of view of political society.

These ideas are developed further in the *Republic*. In the fourth book, Socrates speaks of merely “political” courage as the “preservation through everything of the correct and lawful opinion about what is fearful and what is not” (430b-c). This is a clearly desirable, if unphilosophical disposition. It is contrasted by Glaucon with “the correct opinion about these same things that has come about without education,” which he calls “beastly and slave-like.” Later Socrates credits the philosopher-king with being a “craftsman of moderation and justice and all popular virtue” (500d). The *Republic* thus implies three different levels of virtue (perhaps loosely corresponding to the three classes in the ideal city). First, slave-like

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43 This passage contains many controversial obscurities not directly relevant to my point here. See the helpful discussion in Frede 1999, 26-31.

44a “You seem to me,” Glaucon says to Socrates, “to consider the correct opinion about these same things that has come about without education, being beastly and slavelike (θηριώδη καὶ ἀνδραποδώδη), not at all stable (μόνιμον), and to call it something else than courage” (430b). Socrates agrees. Glaucon’s distinction is obscured by the fact that the best manuscripts read νόμιμον (“lawful”) instead of μόνιμον (the reading of Stobaeus, preferred by Slings, apparently as the lectio difficilior). The crucial point is that political courage is the result of education, while slave-like courage is not.
virtue, based on the natural aversion to pain and attraction to pleasure. Second, political virtue, based on opinions inculcated through education. Finally, philosophical virtue, oriented towards intelligence. Plato’s understanding of virtue is thus radically non-egalitarian. His political vision involves cultivating not only philosophic virtue among the few, but also, *faute de mieux*, deficient forms of virtue among everyone else. It would seem to be merely slave-like virtue that fear of punishment in the afterlife would encourage.

This analysis is easily applied to the *Gorgias*. Throughout their confrontation, it is ambiguous whether Socrates is calling Callicles to the life of philosophy or simply to the life of justice; often these two seem to be simply identified with one another (cf. e.g. 493c, 500c-d). But by the end of the dialogue, Callicles has shown himself to be recalcitrant not only to Socrates’ ethical positions, but to the force of argument itself. In presenting his description of the afterlife, Socrates implicitly demotes Callicles from the position of potential philosopher and candidate for philosophical virtue to one of the many, who can aspire only to slave-like virtue.\(^{45}\) The content of the myth reflects this demotion: it appeals to and encourages a pattern of thinking about morality based on a long-term calculus of pleasures and pains. No special rewards are held out in the myth for the philosopher, who is mentioned only once, as the kind of person most likely to be sent to Isles of the Blessed, but only *qua* private citizen who lives piously, minding his own affairs (526c).\(^{46}\)

The myth of the afterlife in the *Gorgias* is thus a rhetorical device that serves to promote a deficient type of virtue among non-philosophers. The surface meaning of the myth is, for philosophers, thus irrelevant and false. Can we salvage a deeper sense in which it is “true,” as Socrates claims, even for a philosophical audience? Perhaps, following Annas and other modern commentators, we can read it in a radically allegorical way, such that its purpose is merely to reiterate in a more poetic form the basic moral conviction that vice is ultimately

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\(^{45}\) That Socrates has a political project in the *Gorgias*, in that he cares for cultivating political as well as philosophical virtue, should be unsurprising: he has just made his astonishing claim that he is in fact the only person in Athens to engage in politics (521d).

\(^{46}\) In the myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*, the practice of philosophy is made instrumental to choosing the best kind of life for the next incarnation (619c-e). Only in the *Phaedo* (114c) do philosophers seem to get special treatment *qua* philosophers.
harmful and bad. In this minimal sense, Socrates can claim that his myths of judgment, in
the *Phaedo* and elsewhere, are true, or that he trusts that they are. This of course gives us
no reason to think that Plato is really committed to the literal existence of an afterlife.

But why force an allegorical interpretation at all, following the questionable instincts
of Olympiodorus? The content of the myth, with its emphasis not on immortality but on
punishment, still seems like a crude and unsuitable vehicle for conveying this philosophical
truth. Here we can recall the third objection of Colotes, mentioned in the last section,
according to which Plato’s myths are “useless for the wise” because they do not need “terrors”
for moral improvement. Philosophers should be motivated by the desirability of virtue, not
the fearsomeness of vice. It thus seems to me better to suppose that philosophical readers
of the myth in the *Phaedo* are not supposed to take from it a moral for their own lives at all.
Plato, as always, instructs his philosophically-minded readers by offering samples of various
deficient or non-philosophical forms of discourse (obviously faulty arguments for nonetheless
interesting conclusions, protreptic speeches, myths, and so on). He expects them to react
to and engage critically with myths, and also perhaps to learn to imitate them in political
settings. Meanwhile, non-philosophical readers, an inevitable but incidental audience of the
dialogue, may take all of its content at face-value.

So much for the external audience of the myth, i.e. the readers of the dialogue as a text.
Matters are somewhat more straightforward with regard to the primary audience of the myth
within the *Gorgias*, i.e. Callicles. Although we do not hear any response from him at the
end of the dialogue, it seems likely that he would be just as unimpressed by this myth of
the underworld as by the earlier one put forward by Socrates (cf. 493d). We have seen that
Socrates himself admits that Callicles is likely to scorn what he is saying (527a). Now Calli-
cles is an example of the sort of intelligent “young man” posited by Adeimantus, well-versed
in poetry and philosophy. He represents, as it were, a third problematic class *in between*

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The continuing presence of other characters, notably the rhetors Polus and Gorgias, has dramatic
significance; Socrates may be setting an example for them to follow.
philosophers and the non-philosophic multitude. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates conspicuously fails to win over this type. In the *Laws*, this problem is brought to the fore.

### 4.4 The myth of the afterlife in *Laws* X (903a-905d)

The *Laws* is Plato’s longest dialogue and (it is generally thought) his last. Socrates here is absent, and his leading role is taken over by the anonymous Athenian Stranger. His interlocutors are two old men, Kleinias and Megillus, from Crete and Sparta, respectively. In contrast to Socrates’ young Athenian interlocutors, this pair is portrayed as unfamiliar with and somewhat suspicious of philosophy. The scene is set in Crete, where Kleinias is helping to found a colony, to be called Magnesia. The Athenian takes the lead in developing a detailed set of laws for the new city: one of his main proposals is that all laws should be prefixed with “preludes” (προοίμια) that aim at persuading the citizens to accept them (719e-720e, 722a-273b). The lawmaker, he argues, should offer the citizens “exhortation and persuasion” (παραμυθία καὶ πειθώ) rather than just using “force” (βία) to compel obedience. The dialogue includes many examples of both laws and their preludes.

A central question in the interpretation of the *Laws* concerns the status of these preludes: are these meant to be instances of quasi-philosophical teaching, giving the citizens good reasons to obey the laws, or do they rather aim to inculcate socially salutary but possibly false beliefs through emotional appeals? The former view has been forcefully argued for by Bobonich, who thinks that the preludes attempt “to influence the citizens’ beliefs through appealing to rational considerations. They are not intended to inculcate false but useful beliefs or to effect persuasion through non-rational means.”[^1] For Bobonich, this is linked to a supposed evolution in Plato’s views more broadly towards a more egalitarian assessment of people’s capacity for rational morality. Although I cannot consider the question fully here, the following examination of appeals to the afterlife in the *Laws*, with particular attention to a *muthos* related to the afterlife that occurs within a prelude in the tenth book, will instead

[^1]: Bobonich 2002, 104; a free-standing argument for this claim is developed by Bobonich 1991.
support the view that the preludes are primarily devices of non-rational persuasion. The Laws give us no reason to think that Plato’s views about popular morality have changed.

As was the case in Socrates’ educational program in the Republic, immortality and the afterlife play a rather marginal role in the Athenian’s preludes addressed to the future Magnesians. “Immortality” is in fact explicitly appealed to just twice in preludes. The first instance comes in the fourth book, in the prelude to the law on marriage (the very first example of a law with a prelude), the aim of which is to encourage citizens to marry and to penalize those who do not:

“A man must marry between the ages of thirty and thirty-five, thinking that there is a certain way in which the human race naturally has a share of immortality (διανοηθέντα ὡς ἕστιν ἡ τὸ ἀθανάσιον γένος φύσει τινὶ μετείληφεν ἀθανασίας), from which everyone naturally has the desire for all of it. To become famous and not lie nameless when dead is a desire for this sort of thing. The human race is in a way coeval (τι συμφύές) with the whole of time, since it continually follows along with it and will follow along, being in this manner immortal (τούτῳ τῷ τρόπῳ ἀθάνατον ὄν), namely by leaving behind the children of children, being thus always one and the same, having a share in immortality through generation (γενέσθαι τῆς ἀθανασίας μετείληφέναι). To willingly deprive oneself of this is never pious, but the one who does not care about a wife or children willingly does so.” (721b-d)

Here the Athenian claims that humans all desire immortality in the sense of temporally everlasting existence, yet can at best achieve this vicariously, for instance by becoming famous (γενέσθαι κλεινόν) and living on in the memory of others. Reproduction, whereby the human race as a whole enjoys literal immortality (though no individual does), is one such mode of vicarious fulfillment. This notion that reproduction offers a way for humans to fulfill a natural desire for immortality rooted in our kinship with the divine is obviously rhetorically appropriate to its context, where marriage and child-rearing are to be encouraged.

49 The very term “prelude” is, after all, drawn from the realm of poetry and music, associated elsewhere in Plato with non-rational persuasion. The Athenian also often uses “exhortation” (παραμύθιον), which is etymologically linked to mythos, as a synonym for “prelude.” Cf. 773e, 885b, 923c. On παραμυθία in Plato in general see Morgan 2000, 164-168.

50 Cf. also several passages not within preludes: 661a-e, where immortality is viewed as impossible; 713a-714a, where a non-literal conception of immortality is in play; and 739e, where the Athenian Stranger speaks of the ideal of making the city immortal, i.e. permanently stable.
The kind of immortality that reproduction will provide, however, belongs strictly speaking to the community and not the individual.

A very different view of immortality is found in the prelude to the law regulating funerals in the twelfth book. Here the Athenian declares:

“One must be persuaded by the law-giver in other matters and when he says that the soul is entirely different from the body, and that in this life what establishes each of us is nothing other than the soul (ἐν αὐτῷ τε τῷ βίῳ τὸ παρεχόμενον ἡμῶν ἕκαστον τούτ’ εἶναι μηδὲν ἀλλ’ ἢ τὴν ψυχήν), while the body merely appears to follow each of us, so that it is well said that the bodily corpses of the dead are simulacra (εἴδωλα), while what each of us really is (τὸν δὲ ὄντα ἡμῶν ἕκαστον ὄντως), which is called an immortal soul, goes off to other gods to give an account, as the ancestral law says—to the good man this is encouraging, to the bad extremely frightening—and that we cannot give any great help to the dead.” (959a-b)

This is a concise and complete account of an afterlife involving rewards and punishments based on the immortality of the soul. No argument for this view is given; rather, the citizens are directed to trust in the authority of the legislator and the “ancestral law” (ὁ νόμος ὁ πάτριος). The view is again appropriate to the prelude’s rhetorical aim, namely to lead citizens to accept limits on funerary expenses and public grieving for the dead, whose fate in the afterlife is entirely dependent on their own conduct in this life. But the conception of immortality implicit in this prelude is incompatible with that found in the other, supporting the view that the preludes are primarily rhetorical in nature.

The best test case, however, for Bobonich’s optimistic view of the preludes as designed to persuade the citizens on a rational level comes in the tenth book of the Laws. The bulk of this book is taken up with an elaborate prelude to the legislation against impiety (ἀσέβεια), which here embraces crimes against religious cults, the family, and the state, as well

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51 Bobonich 2002, 581n147 says that Laws 721b-c “does not claim that interpersonal propagation is the only way for a person to be immortal,” citing 959a-b as evidence. But in fact the two passages are in conflict, since if psychic immortality in the sense of continued postmortem existence is available, then procreation is not the only way to fulfill the natural desire for immortality; thus marriage will lose its special urgency. This brief footnote is the only reference to these two passages in Bobonich’s book.

52 Mayhew 2008 is a translation and philosophical commentary on this text, on which I will often rely in what follows.

53 At 885b the Athenian introduces what he will say as a παραμύθιον. At 907c-d, he speaks of what has gone before as τὸ προοίμιον ἀσεβείας πέρι νόμων.
as the public promotion of certain ideas. This is by far the longest and most philosophically sophisticated prelude in the *Laws*; it is also unusual in that it is developed in part through dialectical exchanges between the Athenian and his interlocutors. As mentioned earlier, the Athenian offers arguments against three theological beliefs that he sees as the roots of impiety, earlier identified by Adeimantus in the *Republic*: that the gods do not exist (886e-899d), that they exist but do not care for human beings (899d-905c), and that they can be persuaded by sacrifices and prayers (905d-907b). Although immortality is not actually mentioned in *Laws X*, a mythic description of the afterlife does play a role in the Athenian’s response to the second allegedly erroneous theological view, which will be my concern here.

According to the Athenian, this mistaken belief in divine insouciance—for which, following Mayhew, I will use the convenient if anachronistic label “deism”—is based on an inference from the observation of human life, in which wicked and unjust men often seem to be happy, achieving honors and worldly success (899d-900b). Presumably some people might be led by this to outright atheism, but others are prevented by “some divine kinship” (συγγένειά τις θεία) from believing that the gods do not exist or are wicked. Such people may instead come to the conclusion that the gods exist and are good but, due to either lack of interest or ability, do not regulate human affairs. The deist holds that everyone *ought* to eventually get what they deserve (in other words, “happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality”55). He regards the divine as failing to realize this kind of justice in the human world, yet wants to avoid calling the divine blameworthy. Deism is thus presented as a considered intellectual response to the problem of moral evil.

The Athenian first makes clear that he already disagrees with the assumption that wicked people are really happy (899e)—they in fact only seem to be so—but he does not here argue this point. Rather, he undertakes to show that it belongs to the basic character of the divine to exercise care (ἐπιμέλεια) over both great and small matters. This argument takes the form

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54 For full treatment of the first argument, see Appendix 1.
55 For Kant, this is “the highest good of a possible world” (*Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak. 5:110).
of a “traditional Socratic elenchus” in which Kleinias is the answerer. The main premise is supplied from the previous argument establishing the existence of the gods. If the gods in charge of the cosmos are good, as was supposedly earlier established (896d-898c), then they must possess moderation, intellect, and courage (900c-e). They are furthermore omniscient and omnipotent (901d). The Athenian then canvasses, in somewhat confusing sequence, at least four possible reasons that the gods would not care for mortal affairs:

1. Human do not deserve care, and the gods know this (902a).
2. Humans deserve care, but the gods are ignorant of this (901b, 902a).
3. The gods know that humans deserve care, but are unable to care for them (901c).
4. The gods know that humans deserve care, but are too lazy to care for them (901b, 902a-b).

The Athenian does not address [1] directly, but points out that human beings have souls, are the “most god-fearing” of all animals, and are said to be the gods’ possessions (902b), suggesting that divine care is appropriate for them. Options [2] and [3] are incompatible with the assumptions that the gods are omniscient and omnipotent. All that remains is [4], which amounts to accusing the gods of a kind of akrasia. This is incompatible with the gods being good and virtuous. The Athenian then concludes the argument by developing a comparison between the gods and mortal craftsman, who do not neglect even the smallest details of their work, since care for the whole requires care for the individual parts (902d-903a). Must the gods not be even better than such humans?

In confronting the problem posed by the apparent existence of moral evil in the world, the Athenian notably has not made any appeal to rewards and punishments in the afterlife to suggest that the gods will, in the end, “settle the score” with those who profit from injustice. Rather, he has argued that the gods must a priori be of such a sort as to be providentially

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56 Mayhew 2008, 162.
57 Both ideas are traditional: Homer says that “the gods know everything” (πάντα ἴσασιν, Odyssey IV.379, 468) and “can do everything” (πάντα δύνανται, Odyssey X.305). With regard to omnipotence, the Athenian actually only gets Kleinias to agree to the circular statement that the gods “can do everything that mortals and immortals have the power to do.” But presumably this is enough for them to control mortal affairs.
58 I here follow the text found in Burnet’s Oxford edition; Mayhew 2008, 165, 217-219 is surprised that the Athenian would even raise such a possibility and discusses various possible emendations.
active in shaping the world as we see it. It is not clear how far this conclusion really goes towards addressing the deist’s concern, however, since it simply conflicts with the evidence of experience, which strongly suggests that moral evil does exist. The Athenian seems to sense some inadequacy in what has been said, as shown by the following important programmatic transition:

Athenian: We now seem to me to have conversed very sensibly (μάλιστα μετρίως διειλέχθαι) with the one who loves to blame the gods for insouciance.

Kleinias: Yes.

Athenian: That is, by forcing (βιάζεσθαι) him with logoi to agree that he does not speak correctly. It seem to me that incantations are also needed, namely some muthoi.

Kleinias: Of what sort, my good man?

Athenian: Let us persuade the young man with logoi to the effect that all things have been arranged by the one caring for the universe with a view to the preservation and virtue of the whole, of which each part as well undergoes and does what is appropriate to the extent that it is capable. (903a-b)

Here the Athenian contrasts two forms of discourse that can be used against the young deist. So far, they have employed the medium of dialectical conversation (διαλέγεσθαι)—which in the Gorgias was presented, at least prima facie, as the more philosophically respectable form. But, the Athenian now admits, this Socratic procedure in fact amounted to the use of force (βία). Presumably, the thought here is that, as the Gorgias illustrates, dialectical refutation can be painful and embarrassing, in the way that punishment is, without being very persuasive. Dialogue is thus aligned with bodily punishment or the threat thereof, exactly what the legislator in the Laws ought to avoid relying on. Although here the young man has been compelled to agree to the Athenian’s theses about the divine, since these are opposed to the weight of his experience he will likely remain inwardly unconvinced, much like Polus or Callicles. So now the Athenian and his companions will use muthoi, referred to as “incantations” (ἐπῳδαί), as a further means of persuasion.

59There are some textual problems in these lines (903a7-b1). I follow Burnet’s Oxford text. Eusebius (Preparation for the Gospel XII.52.20) in quoting this passage then attaches the first part of the Athenian’s second remark (τῷ γε βιάζεσθαι τοῖς λόγοι, etc.) to Kleinias’s intervening reply (Ναί). There is something to be said for Eusebius’s reading as representing a more natural flow of conversation, but this does seem a rather critical (and cogent) remark for Kleinias to make. The received reading implies a rather sharp and unexpected qualification from the Athenian.
The term “incantation” is connected with the domain of magic. In the Laws, it plays an important role in the Athenian’s explanation in the second book of the role of music in education in Magnesia, where songs will be used as “incantations” to habituate the young to feel pleasure and pain in accord with the law (659d-e) and to inculcate a belief that the just life is also the most pleasant (664b-c). With regard to the latter, the Athenian does emphasize that the incantations will accord with the logos of the lawgiver and that this logos is true. But he also says that even if what the logos said was false, it would still be the most profitable lie that the lawgiver could possibly tell to the young, adding that it is possible to persuade the young of just about anything (663d-664a). It thus seems that incantations are non-rational instruments for implanting socially salutary doctrines, especially in the young who cannot critically evaluate them.

Despite all this, Bobonich claims with respect to the muthos that the Athenian delivers in Book X that “the ‘mythic incantation’ that Plato gives is, in fact, an argument: it is an appeal to the atheist to change his mind on the basis of rational considerations.” In order to assess this claim, we must examine the actual content of the passage (903b-905c). Here the formal veneer of dialectical exchange is dropped, and the Athenian speaks at length with only brief interruptions from Kleitias. While the dialectical arguments dealt exclusively with the character of the divine, the “incantations” present a kind of cosmic theodicy that involves the afterlife of the soul.

The Athenian first responds to the problem of evil by reminding his putative opponent (the “young man”) that he is only a small part of the whole universe. The gods, like doctors

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61 Bobonich 1991, 373n34 says that while “Plato is confident that the beliefs the laws recommend are true,” this passage shows that he is willing to admit the possibility of a mistake.” I see it as rather an admission that expediency is more important than truth in this context. The preceding dialectical argument for the identity of the just and pleasant lives is at any rate not a persuasive one.

62 Bobonich 1991, 374. He appeals further to the fact that the medium of persuasion is said to be logos (903b4), which he translates as “arguments.” While it is true that the contrast between mythos and logos is not operative here—logoi are used in both ways of proceeding—this in fact suggests that logos is here serving as an unmarked term and does not mean “argument” in a strong sense.

63 The most important treatments of the passage are Saunders 1973, Saunders 1991, 202-207; Pietsch 2002, and Stalley 2009 (largely devoted to a persuasive critique of Saunders).
and skilled craftsman, manage the parts for the sake of the good of the whole, rather than vice versa (903c). Apparent injustice or evil is thus merely a feature of a part of the world, rather than of the world as a whole. The Athenian accuses the young man of complaining while being ignorant of the fact that “what concerns you comes out in the best way for the universe, and for you, by the power of your common generation” (903d). This accusation that the young man (and perhaps anyone) is simply unable to grasp the overall goodness of the universe (including apparently for the young man himself) anticipates the arguments of contemporary “skeptical theists,” who appeal to our cognitive limitations to explain away the contradiction between belief in a benevolent, omnipotent deity and the appearance of moral evil in the world. As Mohr points out, however, this striking affirmation of cosmic teleology (without appeal to evidence) is also in tension with the cosmology of the Timaeus, where the ability of the divine to realize the best possible cosmos is limited by various necessary factors, including pre-existing matter.

At this point the Athenian abruptly brings up psychic reincarnation:

“Since soul is always attached to a body, sometimes one, sometimes another, and changes (μεταβάλει) in all kinds of ways on account of itself or on account of another soul, no other function is left for the chess-player (τῷ πεττεύτῃ) except to move the character (ἦθος) that is becoming better to a better place (εἰς βελτίω τόπον), and the one becoming worse to a worse one, according to what is appropriate for each, so that it might receive the fitting destiny.” (903d-e)

Here the divine is strikingly compared not to a craftsman, as before, but rather to the player of a board game. One point of this metaphor is simply that the gods are somehow constrained, as it were by the rules of the game, to move their pieces (individual humans) in a certain fashion according to how the character of each develops. The rather surprising characterization of the divine attitude to humanity as ludic has in fact already been alluded

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64 So Mohr 1978, 572.
65 For a recent summary and defense of skeptical theism, see Bergmann 2001.
66 Mohr 1978, 573.
67 On what we know about the game of πεττεία, see Austin 1940. He concludes that the term is a generic one covering a variety of “battle-type” games played without dice, i.e. based on skill rather than chance. Austin views the translation “chess” as inappropriate for the game, but in this context it will not be misleading, so I use it out of simple convenience.
to by the Athenian earlier in the Laws (cf. 803c). It also recalls a fragment of Heraclitus: “time is a child playing, playing at chess—his is the kingship.”

The Athenian goes on to explain, in very obscure terms, how this divine “care for all things” (ἐπιμέλεια τῶν πάντων) is exercised:

“If one shaped all things by transforming (μετασχηματίζων) them, always with regard to the whole, for instance making ensouled water out of fire, and not many things from one or one from many, then after having taken part in the first and second and third generation there would be an unlimited multitude of arrangements being transformed. But now in fact it is wondrously easy for the one taking care of the all.” (903e-904a)

I will not attempt here to improve on (or discuss) the interpretation of this passage offered by Saunders, according to which the Athenian’s point is that the universe is easy for the gods to manage because it is not a chaotic flux along the lines of the theory of Heraclitus, but is rather generated out of a finite number of interrelated geometrical entities, along the lines of the theory laid out in the Timaeus (53a-57d). If Saunders is right, however, then a natural question is: what could the regularity of transformations and other processes involving natural bodies possibly have to do with the fate of individual souls based on moral considerations? The Athenian provides no hint of how this could be the case. Worse, the very notion that motions of soul are somehow facilitated or rendered predictable by the nature of fundamental bodies sits very uneasily with his concern earlier in Laws X to show that soul is prior to bodies and the cause of their movements.

After this dark passage, Kleinias understandably expresses confusion. In reply the Athenian launches into a long monologue, interrupted only once with a brief sign of agreement from Kleinias. He begins:

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68Fragment 52 Diels-Kranz: αἰὼν παῖς ἐστι παῖζον παιδὸς ἡ βασιλεία. The allusion to this fragment and the Heraclitean overtones throughout this passage are pointed out by Saunders 1973, 241.
69Mayhew 2008, 174 calls it “one of the densest, most impenetrable passages in the Laws.”
70Diès, in his Budé edition, accepts a correction in one manuscript that inserts a μὴ before πρὸς τὸ ὅλον ἀεὶ βλέπων. This reading is followed without comment by Mayhew 2008.
71I follow the manuscripts’ reading οἷον ἐκ πυρὸς ὕδωρ ἐμψυχον. Some emend to ἐμψυχρον (“cold”).
72This is the central argument of Saunders 1973.
73Saunders 1973, 243 says: “Plato’s point is simply that since efficient eschatology consists of disposing souls according to the four main world masses, his own physics facilitates such a procedure because they ensure that there are four such more or less discrete masses (see Timaeus 57c) to which the souls may go.”
“Our king noticed that all actions are ensouled (ἐμψύχους οὖσας τὰς πράξεις ἁπάσας) and that there is much virtue in them, but also much vice, and that soul and body have both been generated to be indestructible, but not eternal, just like the gods that exist according to custom—for there would not be generation of living things if either one of these was destroyed—and thought that whatever in soul is good naturally benefits, but what is bad harms.” (904a-b).

The Athenian here mentions three basic entities in the universe: the “king,” soul, and body. The “king” seems to be the same as the chess-player, i.e. a divine figure like the craftsman of the *Timaeus* as opposed to the “gods that exist according to custom.” (He apparently has a more active role than the craftsman of the *Timaeus*, not merely creating but exercising ongoing rule over the world.) Soul and body are said to be indestructible (ἀνώλεθρον) but—apparently in contrast to the king—not eternal (αἰώνιον). They are not eternal because both came to be (as the Athenian has stressed throughout *Laws X*). Now once body (in the sense of “matter”) has come to be, it is clear how it is indestructible: it is endlessly combined and broken down again to form an unending succession of different bodily compositions. It seems likely that the indestructibility of soul is understood in the same way: soul-stuff is indestructible, but it can be apportioned and combined and embodied in different ways. If either soul or body were destroyed, all generation would cease. This is the closest that the Athenian ever comes in *Laws X* to asserting the immortality of the soul; if my reading is right, the immortality of the *individual* soul is clearly not guaranteed.

The Athenian has suggested that soul is responsible for all actions (πράξεως) that take place (“all actions are ensouled”) and that soul contains within itself by nature itself both

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74 This passage, with its emphasis on body and soul as ontological categories, likely inspired the author of the pseudo-Platonic *Epinomis*; cf. my earlier discussion of 981b-c (§ 2.4). Note that nothing here suggests that the Athenian intends to be giving an exhaustive analysis of what exists.

75 On the gods that exist according to custom, cf. *Timaeus* 40d-41a, *Phaedrus* 246c-d.

76 The obscure Greek at 904a8-b2 reads: ἀνώλεθρον δὲ ὄν γενόμενον, ἀλλ’ ὀνκ αἰώνιον, ψυχὴν καὶ σῶμα, καθέπερ οἱ κατὰ νόμον ὄντες θεοὶ—γένεσις γὰρ οὐκ ἄν ποτε ἄν ποτε ἦν ζῷων ἀπολομένον τούτων ταύτηρον. I take it that the meaning is the following. Soul and body are both individually indestructible, but neither is eternal, since both came to be, and thus are everlasting in only one temporal direction. In this they are like the gods of customary religion, who were born but are also immortal. Soul and body, generated themselves, are jointly necessary for the generation of everything else. I thus disagree with the interpretation of England [1921], II.494, apparently followed by Mayhew [2008], 177, according to which the point is that soul and body are each individually indestructible, but the composite of them is not. This interpretation turns on the idea that “soul and body” is treated as a neuter singular. On my view, “indestructible but not eternal” applies to each singularly.
In order to realize the overall teleological order of the cosmos that the Athenian has asserted, “the king” must therefore strategically configure the good and bad actions of soul so that the bad actions will be cancelled out:

“Seeing all this, he contrived where each of the parts should be placed so as to make virtue be victorious and vice defeated in the whole most easily and in the best way. With a view to all this he contrived that something becoming of a certain sort must always receive and settle in a seat of a certain sort and certain places. The causes of becoming of a certain sort he left up to the wishes of each of us. According to how one desires, being of a certain sort with respect to soul, each one of us pretty much always becomes in that way and of that sort, for the most part.” (904b-c)

As already before, the king’s activity in this regard is described in explicitly spatial terms: it involves moving souls to different “places” (τόποι) according to what sort of soul each becomes. The Athenian stresses the preservation of individual responsibility for the development of character: what sort of person we become is left up to our “wishes” (βουλήσεις), although only “for the most part” (ὡς τὸ πολύ).

In what follows the Athenian explains in more detail how souls receives rewards and penalties appropriate to their self-determined characters (904c-d). As souls change, “they are carried along according to the order and law of destiny” (φέρεται κατὰ τὴν τῆς εἰμαρμένης τάξιν καὶ νόμον). Smaller changes in character result in movement “on the surface of the earth,” while souls that become severely unjust “go to the depths and the places said to be below, which men greatly fear and dream of, both while living and when released from their bodies, calling them Hades and other names like that.” By contrast, “mixing with divine virtue” leads to a soul moving to “an outstanding and entirely holy place.” This is the first explicit reference in the myth to rewards and punishments in the afterlife, although the Athenian seems to hold that souls receive their just deserts in this life too (this is presumably what horizontal movement on earth amounts to). Again, although the correspondence of certain types of movement to certain types of character is fixed as a matter of destiny, a

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77 Compare how the Athenian apparently posits the existence of non-divine souls able to do evil at 896c-897c. The status of the interventions of the king himself is left vague; perhaps these do not count as “actions.”
78 Mayhew 2008, 179-180 thinks that horizontal motion refers to reincarnation in other living bodies.
soul’s partaking of virtue or vice comes about “on account of its own wish (βούλησιν) and its predominant association” with other souls.

The climax of the Athenian’s appeal (904e-905c) begins with the quotation of a line from Homer: “this is the judgment (δίκη) of the gods who hold Olympus” (Odyssey XIX.43). Shifting into a direct address to the intransigent young man, the Athenian emphasizes the generational gap between “this assembly of old men” (ἡδε ἡ γερουσία) that is speaking and the addressee, who is condescendingly referred to as an impetuous “child or youth (παῖ καὶ νεανίσκε) who thinks he is neglected by the gods.” The message of this final section moves away from offering a cosmic theodicy, in response to the young man’s original worry about the apparent successes of the wicked in this life, to an exhortation to virtue based on simple fear-mongering about eventual retribution. “Neither you nor anyone else who has missed the mark will ever boast of having escaped this judgment (δίκης) of the gods,” the Athenian tells the young man. “You will pay their appropriate penalty (τείσεις αὐτῶν τὴν προσήκουσαν τιμωρίαν) either remaining here or having travelled to Hades or having been brought to a place even more distant than these” (905a).

I have translated δίκη in this passage as “judgment,” but the original context of the line that the Athenian quotes from the nineteenth book of the Odyssey requires an alternative meaning of the word, namely “way” or “characteristic behavior.”79 The context is this: Odysseus and Telemachus are secretly removing the weapons from the banquet hall by night, and Athena provides a miraculous light to guide them. Telemachus wonders what is going on, but his father rebukes him: “Be silent, check your thought and do not ask questions. This is the way (δίκη) of the gods who hold Olympus” (Odyssey XIX.42-43). It seems likely that Plato did have this original context in mind, as it is obviously appropriate in this “incantation” directed at a young freethinker. The point about the translation of δίκη is in fact

79 On δίκη in early Greek texts, see Gagarin 1973, Gagarin 1974, and Dickie 1978. Gagarin thinks that in Homer the term means either “legal settlement or decision” or “characteristic or proper behavior.” Although the latter meaning seems to occur only in the Odyssey, both meanings would be independently derived from the root (*deik-, cf. δεικνύμι). Dickie argues that a moral meaning of δίκη (“justice, righteousness”) is also present in Homer.
somewhat significant. Up to this point, the vocabulary of justice and judgment has been entirely absent in the refutation of divine insouciance; as Mayhew notes, justice is even missing from the list of virtues of the gods in the dialectical refutation (cf. 900d-e). Although the Athenian’s stated aim was to show that the gods exercise a kind of personal care for human beings, when the term δίκη does finally come up in the climax of the Athenian’s myth, it appears to be used in an impersonal sense closer to that familiar from some pre-Socratic texts, where it refers to a kind of ordering principle for the cosmos.

The main idea of the “incantation” thus appears to be that the universe is so structured that rewards and punishments for souls, based on their characters, are guaranteed by natural regularities in the order of the things. We have, as Saunders puts it, a “scientific” picture of the afterlife, based on “an automatic or semi-automatic system.” This interpretation underlies a reworking of this passage in a discussion of the afterlife by Plotinus:

But since there is much place (τόπου) for each, different outcomes must come from the disposition of each and the justice in the nature of things (παρὰ τῆς ἐν τοῖς οὖσι δίκης). For no one can ever avoid what it is fitting to suffer for unjust deeds: the divine law is inescapable and has already in itself the execution of the judgment (ὁμοῦ ἔχων ἐν ἑαυτῷ τὸ ποιῆσαι τὸ κριθὲν ἤδη). The sufferer himself is carried (φέρεται) unwittingly to what it is fitting for him to suffer and, being tossed in every direction in his wanderings with unstable motion, finally, as if having labored much, by his resistance falls to the place (τόπον) that is appropriate to him, having non-voluntary suffering because of voluntary motion. (Ennead IV.3.24.6-16)

The basic idea, in both the myth in the Laws and in Plotinus, nonetheless remains that bad consequences in the afterlife should motivate virtuous behavior now, while it is up to us.

The notion of a corrective function of punishment (maintained by the Athenian elsewhere

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80 Mayhew 2008, 159-160. He declines to make much of this fact, on the grounds that the Athenian must surely think that the gods are just. It is true that justice is crucial to the third argument of the prelude, against the notion that the gods are swayed by gifts.

81 Cf. the use of the phrase διδόναι δίκην in the extant fragment of Anaximander, the mysterious figure δίκη πολλόποινος in the poem of Parmenides (fr. 1.14 Diels-Kranz), and Heraclitus, fr. 80 Diels-Kranz. In these examples, the judicial sense seems to have been metaphorically transferred to the operations of the cosmos.


83 Henry and Schwyzler ingeniously detect an allusion here to a line from the Aetia of Callimachus: ἐκ δ’ αὐτάγρεσίης πολλάκι πολλὰ κακῶν, “having labored much by free choice” (fr. 23 Pfeiffer, line 20). The context is fragmentary for us but involves the labors of Heracles.
in the *Laws*, e.g. at 854d) is entirely absent: the bad consequences can in no way be said to benefit the individual, though they may be to the benefit of the whole cosmos.\textsuperscript{84} All that has really changed from the myth of the *Gorgias* is the mechanism of enforcement.

Any reader that has made it through this rather arduous summary will probably agree that the Athenian’s myth is unlikely to enjoy any broad popular appeal. It is received positively, but entirely passively, by the elderly Kleinias and Megillus, about whose capacity for philosophy the Athenian has been openly pessimistic in the rest of *Laws* X; the future citizens of Magnesia may not be able to do much better.\textsuperscript{85} The targets of the *muthos* in *Laws* X are rather sophisticated young men who are not just clever enough to draw morally pernicious conclusions from traditional poetry and mythology (like Adeimantus in the second book of the *Republic*), but are also well-versed in pre-Socratic cosmology and the inquiry into nature. It is to them the “scientific” version of the afterlife, in which rewards and punishments are integrated into a naturalistic framework, is calculated to appear persuasive.\textsuperscript{86}

The prelude to the law on impiety in the tenth book is, again, the longest and most sophisticated prelude in the *Laws*—the best test for Bobonich’s view that the preludes are designed to persuade the citizens on a rational level. One programmatic passage on which Bobonich leans heavily comes in the fourth book of the *Laws*, when the Athenian initially introduces the notion of preludes. Here he compares the ideal legislator to a “free doctor” who investigates illnesses “according to nature” and views it as important to teach and persuade the patient (720d). Later, in the ninth book, the Athenians returns to this comparison, claiming that a doctor practicing medicine “based on experiences, without an *logos*” would ridicule the free doctor’s way of “using *logoi* close to philosophizing (\(τοῦ \phiιλοσοφεῖν \varepsilon\'γγ\'\ν\varepsilon\′ \chiρ\'\im\varepsilon\′\ν\varepsilon\ο\′\varepsilon\ ϋ\'\i\′\α\ο\′\varepsilon\′\))”, grasping the illness from the beginning, and referring it back to the whole nature of bodies” (857c-e). The Athenian’s myth in the tenth book perfectly illustrates

\textsuperscript{84}Cf. Mohr 1978, 574: “Nor is the punishment of evil souls here meant primarily to serve a purgatorial or educational purpose.”

\textsuperscript{85}Cf. the apt comments by Mayhew 2008, 98-99, 104-106.

\textsuperscript{86}A similar interpretation is put forward by Stalley 2009, 204, who argues that the myth is intended “to convey the message that we will in some way be rewarded or punished after death without relying on the kind of mythical detail which the young atheist [sic] would obviously reject.”
the ambiguity in this reference *logoi* that are “close to philosophizing.” Although it makes claim to rational credentials, it does not actually invite rational scrutiny. The scientific presentation is a rhetorical veneer; at its core is the same threat of rewards and punishments in the afterlife found in the *Gorgias*. Now *Laws X* is one of the founding texts of the tradition of natural theology; indeed, it foreshadows many ideas found in the contemporary philosophy of religion (for instance, the possible role of free will in justifying moral evil). Plato’s project of a more subtle form of indoctrination aimed at intellectuals has, historically speaking, been a great success.
5 Immortality and Recollection

According to Plato’s doctrine that “learning” is really “recollection” (ἀνάμνησις), the apparent acquisition of new knowledge and understanding depends on truths already present in the soul, not derived from sensory experience. Recollection is mentioned explicitly only in three dialogues—the *Meno*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Phaedrus*—in each case alongside arguments that the soul is immortal. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the connection between the two doctrines.

The nature of this connection might seem obvious. On a literal reading of the doctrine of recollection as Plato’s Socrates presents it, the soul acquired certain truths while in a disembodied state prior to being born in a human body. In the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, Socrates suggests that recollection thus entails the soul’s prenatal existence and thus its immortality. As I will show, however, Socrates’ arguments from recollection to immortality turn out to be circular, assuming the soul’s prenatal existence as a premise. Even if we grant the weaker claim that learning requires cognitive resources not derived from experience, Socrates does not rule out alternative explanations—for instance, that we are simply born with certain innate pieces of knowledge or dispositions to form them.

The theory of recollection is, however, also connected to immortality in another way. In the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*, at least, the truths present in the soul that are recollected involve the Forms. In the first two chapters of this work, I argued that it is primarily in

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1Recollection is meanwhile notoriously *not* mentioned in other contexts where it might be expected, for instance, in Plato’s most detailed discussions of human knowledge in *Republic* V-VII and the *Theaetetus*. A developmental solution does not seem appealing here, since the *Phaedrus* is likely later than both dialogues. I will not make any effort to deal with this problem in this chapter.
virtue of the soul’s privileged relationship to the intelligible realm of Forms that it can be called immortal. Examining the theory of recollection will give us a better grasp of what this relationship is. The result, however, is surprising. Recollection is usually taken to be a cornerstone of dogmatic Platonism, explaining philosophy as a quest for knowledge grounded in an acquaintance with independent metaphysical entities, the Forms. I present a different, “skeptical” reading of the theory, whereby it is meant to solve a problem arising from the nature of Socrates’ philosophical practice.

A conviction about the value of philosophical inquiry is at the basis of Socrates’ way of life. In the Apology he famously says that “to make _logoi_ about virtue,” examining others and himself, as he does in dialogues like the _Meno_, is the greatest human good, since “the unexamined life is not worth living” (Apology 38a). He has surprisingly little to show for this commitment, however. As he puts it earlier in the Apology: “I am aware of myself being wise about neither anything great nor anything small” (21b). After all, his investigations into virtue (as portrayed in Plato’s dialogues) reliably lead to perplexity. How can the philosophical way of life practiced by Socrates not lead to discouragement about the very possibility of philosophical inquiry leading to knowledge?

Plato’s theory of recollection, I argue, answers this difficulty. Its purpose is primarily psychological: it serves to render meaningful the pursuit of philosophical inquiry even though clear knowledge (about certain subjects, at least) may not be possible for us. This explains why Socrates’ presentation of the theory, at least in the _Meno_ and the _Phaedrus_, involves myth. We will see, however, that myth’s function with regard to recollection is importantly different than its function in Plato’s descriptions of the afterlife, dealt with in the last chapter.

Aspects of my argument will involve taking stands on complex and controversial questions about Plato’s theory of Forms, which I will not always be able to fully defend here. In this chapter I will also sometimes appeal to epistemological ideas from the Hellenistic schools (Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Pyrrhonian skepticism). Often these appeals will function merely as a heuristic device, but I will also speculate about actual relationships of influence,
in order to illustrate how Plato’s texts inspired thinkers outside of the tradition of dogmatic Platonism prominent in the preceding chapters. Here too my treatment will be merely suggestive.

The chapter is organized into four parts. The first section deals with recollection and immortality in the *Meno*. I claim that Socrates introduces recollection as a myth to keep us from despairing about the possibility of successful philosophical inquiry. The second treats an influential passage early in the *Phaedo* known as Socrates’ Defense, in which the Forms are first introduced. Here I argue that, according to a literal reading of what Socrates says, the Forms are not possible objects of knowledge for us during this life. In the third section, I turn to the so-called Recollection Argument later in the *Phaedo*, interpreting it in light of my reading of the Defense. The fourth section considers very briefly the evidence of the *Phaedrus* concerning the theory of recollection.

### 5.1 Recollection and immortality in the *Meno* (81a-86c)

In the *Meno*, Socrates gives an argument for the immortality of the soul based on its ability to recollect (85d-86b). The argument has been little discussed by commentators, perhaps because it is so obviously flawed. To see why Plato includes it at all, we need to consider the broader context, i.e. how Socrates introduces recollection and immortality as a response to a problem raised by his interlocutor, Meno, about the possibility of learning through dialectical inquiry. In this section, I argue that for Socrates in the *Meno* the theory of recollection is a mythological response to a challenge that later ancient skeptics would recognize: why should we continue to search for truth when it seems that truth cannot be found?

Socrates and Meno have been searching for a definition of virtue (*ἀρετή*). After Socrates demolishes several confident attempts, a frustrated Meno protests that what they are attempting to do is impossible. He poses his challenge in the form of three questions:

**Meno:** [1] But in what way, Socrates, will you search for something when you do not know at all what it is (*μὴ οἶσθα τὸ παράπαν ὅτι ἐστίν*)? [2] What sort of thing among...
the things you don’t know will you set down as what you’re searching for? [3] And if you do come upon it after all, how will you know that this is what you didn’t know?

SOCRATES: I understand what kind of thing you want to say, Meno. Don’t you see what a debaters’ argument (ἐριστικὸν λόγον) you’re bringing up, that a human being cannot search either for what he knows, or for what he doesn’t? He wouldn’t search for what he knows—he knows it, and has no need to search—nor for what he knows—for he doesn’t know what he’s searching for.

MENO: Doesn’t that seem to you to be a fine thing to say, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Not to me. (80d-81a)

Alluding to how Socrates claimed at the beginning of the dialogue to “know nothing at all about virtue” (71b), Meno suggests that someone in this position cannot hope to search (ζητεῖν) for a definition successfully. His three questions in fact raise two distinct problems.

[1] and [2] challenge the possibility of searching or starting to search for something unknown, while [3] challenges the possibility of actually finding the unknown thing. Following Scott, I will refer to these as “the problem of inquiry” and “the problem of discovery” respectively.

Socrates accuses Meno of proposing a “debaters’ argument,” i.e. merely a sophism of the sort used to win a debate. But his restatement of Meno’s challenge is not quite accurate.

Socrates ignores the problem of discovery and makes the problem of inquiry one half of a broader dilemma. According to the dilemma, all searching is futile, since one must search for either what one knows or what one does not know. The first type of searching is pointless, the second impossible. This restatement in dilemmatic form serves to bring out what is sophistic about the problem of inquiry: it rests on a false dichotomy of “knowing” and “not knowing.”

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2 Cf. Scott 1995, 27-32 and Scott 2006, 76-77. Scott does not think that Meno necessarily intends to raise the problem of discovery; the third question can be read as closely following on the first two, so that the point is merely that if one cannot search for something then a fortiori one cannot find it either. For Scott, Meno has at best only a “fleeting grasp” of the “deeper problem.” What exactly is on Meno’s mind seems to be impossible to tell from the text. Fine 2007, 345-246 points out that “the problem of discovery” could really be two different problems: how it is that one can successfully find something vs. how it is that one can know when one has successfully found something. She adds, however, that these options collapse together if one assumes the internalist thesis that one knows something only if one knows that one knows it (346n33). To my mind Plato clearly counts as an internalist, so this further distinction can be disregarded.

3 Socrates seems to signal this himself in saying “I understand what kind of thing (ὁδὸν) you want to say.” This is connected to the question of the meaning of κατάγεις (80e2), which I have translated colorlessly as “you’re bringing up.” The precise metaphor implied by the verb is obscure: possibilities include spinning, landing a fish from the sea, or restoring exiles.

4 Cf. Theaetetus 188a-c, where Socrates himself employs the dichotomy to render false opinion impossible.
An obvious reply to the sophism is to say that the typical objects of Socrates’ dialectical searches (i.e. common moral concepts) are not in fact completely unfamiliar things. Besides knowledge, there are various kinds of cognitive grasp that amount to less than knowledge, but are nonetheless not total ignorance.

It will be helpful to make a distinction between two such types of cognitive grasp, which I will here call *concepts* and *opinions*. This distinction is not admittedly developed explicitly by Socrates in the *Meno*, but it is implicit in what he says both here and elsewhere (and it will be important later in my argument). The difference is most easily illustrated on the basis of a discussion of the nature of disagreement in the *Euthyphro* (8c-e). Here Socrates makes the point that people have vehement disagreements about whether a certain person committed an injustice by doing a certain thing. These disagreements concern questions of fact, but also about the deeper moral question of what constitutes an injustice. These are differences of opinion. Everyone—even those who do not know what justice or piety is, at least to a standard that would satisfy Socrates—has *opinions* about what is just or pious.

Despite the ubiquity of differences of opinion about justice and injustice, however, Socrates and Euthyphro also agree that “no one among either gods or humans would dare to say that the one who does injustice should not pay the penalty” (ὡς οὐ τῷ γε ἀδικοῦντι δοτέον δίκην). If we grant that this claim would never be disputed, the unanimity would be best explained, I think, by the close and obvious connection, obscured in English translation, between ἀδικία and δίκη. It is practically an analytic truth of language that the former demands the latter. Our familiarity with such words and the analytic relations that obtain between them shows that we possess the *concepts* of justice and injustice.

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5This analysis can also illuminate the moments in the *Apology* when Socrates seems to display confident views about moral matters, for instance in contrasting his lack of knowledge about the afterlife with his convictions about justice: “I know (οἶδα) that it is bad and shameful to do injustice and to disobey one’s better, whether god or human being” (29b). Vlastos 1985 interprets Socrates’ “knowledge” here as merely the provisional results of elenctic examination. A better solution is to say that this “knowledge” amounts merely to invoking concepts—justice is a virtue, virtue is good, injustice is bad. To know that it is “bad to disobey one’s better” does not imply positive knowledge about what “good” and “bad” are.
Concepts (as I am speaking of them) are the building blocks of ordinary linguistic ability. As such they are universally shared, at least by speakers of the same language, but their cognitive content is minimal: the meaning of concepts can be disputed. Compared to concepts, opinions are richer, synthetic ideas that go beyond obvious linguistic connections and that are thus open to dispute. In the *Meno*, Socrates and Meno are familiar with the word “virtue,” can invoke it in discussion, and are in unproblematic agreement about various connections between “virtue” and other terms (e.g. virtue is good, justice is virtue). They possess, in other words, the relevant concepts. This does not mean that they know either what justice or virtue themselves are or the precise nature of the connection between them (e.g. whether justice is a part, an instance, or the whole of virtue). All the same, Meno at least certainly does have some more sophisticated notions about virtue (for instance, that virtue is different for men and women, or that virtue is the ability to rule over people). These are opinions, which can be exposed to dialectical scrutiny and found to be false or contradictory.

In sum, we possess a variety of cognitive resources, including both concepts and opinions, which make it possible to set out on a dialectical search. This is an answer to the problem of inquiry. This reply does not, however, solve the problem of discovery, which is not a sophism but a fundamental worry about our ability to attain knowledge. (This explains why Socrates omits it in his formulation of the “debaters’ argument.”) As I see it, the problem of discovery is this: without knowledge, how can one be sure that the results of one’s search are true? As Scott [2006, 84-87] explains it, the problem of discovery is a worry about how opinions alone can ever come to constitute knowledge: inquirers “will always be trapped within a circle of belief.” He sees this as a worry specifically for Socrates, due to his acceptance of two controversial epistemological principles, namely “the foreknowledge principle” and “the priority of definition.” My formulation of the problem of discovery above is simpler but also stronger. I see it not as an *ad hominem* issue for Socrates but rather a general skeptical argument against the possibility of acquiring knowledge; compare the memorable image given by Sextus Empiricus, whereby philosophers are like people looking for gold in completely dark room filled with many treasures (*Against the Mathematicians* VII.52). Fine [2007, 349-350] rejects Scott’s “circle of beliefs objection” as a ground for the problem of discovery. She thinks that discovery can occur through elenctic inquiry beginning from opinions: “we emerge from a circle of mere beliefs when we acquire a large enough circle of true, mutually supporting, and explanatory beliefs.” On my view, it is far from obvious that we can pin this kind of “coherentist” account of knowledge on Plato, regardless of Socrates’ remark later in

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showing that the common opinions that served as starting-points are at least often muddled and contradictory. But even if a result was reached, we could not assume that it was reliable, nor would we have any means of verifying it. Our opinions, after all, could be mutually compatible, yet false. The content of our concepts, even if true, is minimal. Thus our concepts and opinions, even false ones, allow the search to get off the ground, but they do not guarantee that it will reach a successful conclusion.

To the problem of inquiry, at least, Socrates would seem to have an easy answer. Surprisingly, however, he does not—either here or at any point later in the Meno—directly offer as a solution to the problem of inquiry the distinction between knowledge on the one hand and opinions and concepts on the other. Later in the dialogue Socrates will give a hint in this direction by making explicit the distinction between opinion and knowledge (cf. 85c-d, 97b), in light of which his earlier claims to know nothing about virtue need no longer be read as declarations of total ignorance. But his immediate reply to Meno is in quite a different vein.

In response to Meno’s request for an explanation, Socrates alludes vaguely to things that he has heard from “men and women wise about divine matters,” namely “those priests and priestesses who care about being able to give an account concerning the things they deal with” (81a). Scholars usually identify these people, not very helpfully, as Orphics or Pythagoreans. Socrates also appeals to Pindar and “many other of the poets who are divine.” They all allegedly claim “that the soul of a human being is immortal, and that at some times it comes to an end point (τέλευτάν), which is called ‘dying,’ and sometimes is born again, but is never destroyed.” Therefore, these sources continue, “one must live one’s life as piously as possible” (81b).

Socrates explains why this latter recommendation follows from the soul’s immortality by quoting a passage from a lost poem (probably a dirge by Pindar) that alludes obscurely to a cycle of reincarnation and rewards and punishments in the afterlife. Along with another the Meno (which Fine appeals to) to the effect that opinions are transformed into knowledge by adding a reasoned explanation (98a). For a reading of Plato that stresses the gap between opinion and knowledge, cf. Vogt 2012.

7 My explanation of the fragment follows Bluck 1961, 277-286 and Sharples 1985, 145-149.
Pindaric passage (Olympian 2.56-80) this is our earliest literary testimony to such ideas. “For those from whom,” Socrates begins:

“...Persephone accepts the penalty of an ancient grief, in the ninth year she returns their souls back to the light above. From them arise glorious kings and men swift in strength and greatest in wisdom. For the rest of time they are called holy heroes by human beings.” (81b-c)

According to the fragment, Persephone, the queen of Hades, punishes the souls of human beings who have died because she holds them responsible for her “ancient grief.” This was apparently the death of her son Zagreus (a shadowy figure sometimes associated with Dionysus) at the hands of the Titans, from whose ashes humankind was born—yielding a kind of “original sin” for which humans must pay despite not being directly responsible for it. In the case of a small group of human beings (presumably those who have lived most piously), Persephone deems that they have paid a sufficient penalty at the end of a nine-year period (a traditional length of time for exile after a serious crime) and sends them back up to earth to be reincarnated as the best sort of human beings. Apparently, this will be their last incarnation on earth: after their death, their souls, now in some better place, will receive veneration from living human beings (i.e. in hero-cult).

So far Socrates has said nothing actually relevant to the issues raised by Meno. The remarks about the afterlife and the need to live piously seem like a digression, and one might suspect that Socrates’ deference to the authority of wise priests and poets is ironic.

8 Sharples 1985, 146 points out that in the Laws Plato hints that this origin left traces that inspire humans to do wicked things, speaking of our “so-called ancient Titanic nature” (701c) and blaming temple robbery on a “gadfly naturally implanted in humans from ancient and unexpiated injustices” (854b).

9 I here disagree with several claims made in Scott 2006. First, the phrase ὅσοις μεμέληκε περὶ ὧν μεταχειρίζονται λόγον οἵοις τ’ εἶναι διδόναι (81a11-b1) need not suggest that the priests and priestesses can “give an account” in a strong, philosophical sense (cf. Scott 2006, 95). As Bluck 1961, 276 says, Socrates means merely that these priests “held certain δόγματα and were ready to explain them.” We should not assume that Socrates is claiming rational authority for what he says; rather, he is simply presenting a logos that he invites Meno to examine for himself (81b2-3). Second, Scott 2006, 93-94 infers that for Socrates “living piously” involves recollection. But this seems like an excessive assimilation of conventional morality and philosophical activity. Socrates does not make this connection, and Pindar doubtless did not either. Finally, Scott 2006, 81, 92 thinks that Socrates brings up the priests and poets to Meno because he is “whetting his appetite for the exotic and thus luring him into making the effort to inquire for himself,” using allusions so “irresistibly intriguing” that “Meno is agog.” This reading is at best unsupported by the text. Meno seems in fact uninterested in the religious aspects of what Socrates says; his questions at 81a could well be read as expressing skepticism and impatience with Socrates’ vague and coy remarks.
(Poets, after all, are in general suspect for Plato as sources of knowledge.) Socrates now, however, connects these musings with the problem of searching:

“As the soul is immortal and has often been born, and has seen both what is here and what is in Hades, indeed, all things, there is nothing that it has not learned (μεμάθηκεν). So it would not be amazing if it could recollect (ἀναμνησθῆναι) what it earlier knew (ἡπίστατο), both about virtue and about other things. For given that all nature is related and that the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents someone, having recollected just one thing—what human beings call learning—from finding the rest, if one is courageous (ἀνδρεῖος) and does not grow weary of searching. For searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection (ἀνάμνησις). So we should not be persuaded by that eristic argument, for it makes us lazy (ἀργούς) and is pleasant for human beings who are soft (μαλακοῖς) to hear, while this one makes us diligent and eager to search (ἐργατικούς τε καὶ ζητητικούς). Trusting that it is true, I would like to search with you for what virtue is.” (81c-e)

After the quotation from Pindar, Socrates abandons the grammatical construction of indirect discourse; he is no longer merely reporting the views of the priests and poets. On the other hand, his phrasing (“it would not be amazing,” “nothing prevents”) is tentative rather than confident. His final assurance that he “trusts” in the truth of the logos (πιστεύων ἀληθεῖ εἶναι) recalls his guarded endorsement of the afterlife myth in the Gorgias as “the things that I have heard and trust to be true” (524a-b). Although he does not use the term muthos, Socrates is here likewise entering the mythical domain.

The mythical mode of exposition should obviously affect our assessment of Socrates’ commitment to recollection as a serious philosophical theory; it has in some sense the same status as his descriptions of the afterlife. Notice, however, that while the notions of immortality and reincarnation belong to the mythical tradition, recollection seems to be in some sense Socrates’ own idea, his own development of the tradition, even if he falls short of strongly endorsing it. According to his myth, the soul once knew absolutely “all things” (πάντα χρήματα), on the basis of having seen them, but then (apparently—Socrates does not say this explicitly) somehow forgot it all. This forgetting is not irrevocable, however; the soul

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10 For more on “trust” (πίστις), see § 6.2. Commentators who stress the mythic nature of what Socrates says include Klein 1965, 95 and Weiss 2001, 63-76. For Weiss the whole thesis of recollection has been “sloppily and hastily assembled from the jumble of just-discussed Pythagorean-like ideas” which Socrates clearly does not take seriously. This verdict seems harsh, and places too little weight on the fact that Socrates does say he trusts the account to be true.
can recollect its prior knowledge. “Having recollected just one thing,” a person can then find the rest through a process of searching, aided by the fact that “all nature is related.” Recollection is thus presented as an answer to both the problem of inquiry and the problem of discovery—problems which arise from Socrates’ own typical mode of investigation.

When Meno asks for further explanation, Socrates conducts his famous experiment with Meno’s slave, in which the slave finds the length of the sides of a square with an area of eight squared units. The experiment has three phases. Socrates first explains the problem and elicits from the slave a confident but inaccurate answer, namely that the side must be four units long (82b-e). He then gets the slave to admit that this answer is wrong, as is another possible candidate (three units long), such that the slave confesses that he simply does not know the answer (82e-84a). Finally, Socrates helps the slave to arrive at the correct answer, namely that the sides of the desired square must be equal to the diagonal of the square with an area of four units squared (84d-85b). Throughout, Socrates almost exclusively asks questions and insists that he is therefore not “teaching” the slave.

Does this experiment succeed in demonstrating that inquiry and discovery are possible? The first two phases bear an obvious resemblance to Socrates’ dialectical searches, in which his interlocutors offer various unsatisfactory answers and are brought to aporia. Socrates himself calls attention to this correspondence with the malicious remark that, before being made to recognize his own ignorance, the slave believed he could give speeches to large groups about the topic (84b-c), just as Meno earlier thought he could do regarding virtue (80b). These two stages do seem to illustrate well how inquiry is possible.

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11 Pace Scott 2006, 79-83, who argues laboriously that the theory of recollection is not meant as a response to the problem of inquiry. I do not see how this can be squared with Socrates’ statement that “searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection” (81d). Scott thinks that Socrates does not deal with the problem of inquiry because he thinks the solution is so obvious; yet, as noted above, Socrates never actually applies the obvious solution to the problem (namely, the distinction between knowledge and opinion). Given that Socrates focuses exclusively on the problem of inquiry in his restatement of Meno’s challenge, it would be deeply implausible for him in what follows to concern himself solely with the problem of discovery (especially when he has not called attention to the distinctness of the two problems). Scott’s argument is also criticized by Fine 2007, 342-345.
It is true, as many readers of the *Meno* feel, that Socrates often feeds the slave the required answers with leading questions. Nonetheless, the slave is able to follow Socrates’ questions, understand logical relationships, and eliminate certain possibilities as false. While it may seem perverse to deny that Socrates “teaches” the slave, the experiment is not simply a transfer of information; the slave’s learning process clearly involves a substantial cognitive contribution from the slave himself. Notice that Socrates himself points out the slave’s ability to speak Greek (82b), thus alluding to how the slave has what I have called concepts. These concepts (e.g. “line,” “square”) allow the slave to articulate various opinions about possible side lengths for the desired square, which can then be scrutinized.

The third, constructive phase of the experiment, in which a correct answer is reached, has no counterpart in a typical aporetic Socratic dialogue. It presumably serves to demonstrate the possibility of discovery. As such, however, it is suspect in at least two regards. First, it is just at this point that Socrates’ claim to not convey information seems obviously false: he himself supplies the crucial detail by calling the slave’s attention to the diagonal (84e-85b). Second, the answer reached by the slave, that the desired side length is the diagonal, is superficial: he points out the line, but does not give the actual length, which (in modern terms) is not an integer but an irrational number ($\sqrt{8}$, about 2.83). That some magnitudes could not be represented by ratios was a significant problem for ancient Greek mathematics.

Socrates has brought the slave to the brink of this issue, but does not raise it. In an important respect, then, the slave does not understand the solution that he reaches.

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12 Cebes, summarizing the doctrine of recollection in the *Phaedo*, takes it for granted that there will be a skillful questioner (*ἐάν τις καλῶς ἐρωτᾷ*, 73a8). Cf. Scott 2006, 100-102, who notes the similarity of this reading to Augustine’s theory of illumination. In support of this reading, we can appeal to the ambiguity of the verb *μανθάνειν*, which can mean “learning” but also “understanding.” This ambiguity is highlighted at the beginning of the section we have been considering, in the way Socrates responds to Meno’s challenge: “I understand (*μανθάνω*) what kind of thing you want to say, Meno” (80e). A less nuanced verdict on the experiment is offered by Weiss 2001, 94-106, who calls it “farcical.” I think it is important to see that Plato is calling our attention to something genuinely surprising about how learning seems to occur.

13 On the discovery of incommensurability in Greek mathematics see Von Fritz 1945.

14 The significance of this point about incommensurability is not frequently remarked on: see Brown 1967 for extended discussion of how the answer arrived at by the slave is actually unsatisfactory. The slave receives a true opinion, without understanding it, as the result of an external intervention. Compare how, at the end of the dialogue, Socrates suggests that virtue comes about by “divine dispensation without intellect” (*θείᾳ μοίρᾳ...ἀνευ νοῦ*, 99e-100a). Perhaps this is the kind of thing that the experiment actually illustrates.
The third phase of the experiment was thus not an instance of real discovery. Socrates confirms this when, after the experiment is complete, he says that the slave has so far only attained true opinions (85c). But he then looks forward to a future stage, not attained in the experiment, in which the slave will actually have knowledge:

Socrates: These opinions of his were just now stirred up like a dream. But if one should ask him these same things many times in many ways, you know that in the end he would know about these things no less precisely than anyone.

Meno: Likely so.

Socrates: So he will know (ἐπιστήσεται)—with no one teaching, but just asking questions—recovering the knowledge himself from himself (ἀναλαβὼν αὐτὸς ἐξ αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐπιστήμην)?

Meno: Yes.

Socrates: But to recover knowledge himself in himself (αὐτὸν ἐν αὑτῷ) is to recollect, no?

Meno: Of course.

Socrates: So the knowledge, which he has now (ἂν νῦν ὁδὸς ἔχει), he either got it at some time or always had it (ἦτοι ἔλαβεν ποτε ἢ ἀεὶ ἔειχεν)?

Meno: Yes. (85c-d)

Here Socrates claims that the slave—who allegedly could eventually gain knowledge without being taught—must somehow already have knowledge within him, so that the apparent acquisition is really a “recovery” of it. Unfortunately, how it can be that the slave already has knowledge about what he does not know is not very clear from what Socrates says. The best way to make sense of this is perhaps to make a distinction—admittedly, one not explicit in the text—between latent knowledge, which the slave “has now,” and explicit knowledge, which even after the experiment he does not have.15

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15This interpretation is embraced by Scott 2006 and seems to be confirmed by how Cebes summarizes the doctrine of recollection in the Phaedo, where he speaks of “knowledge being in” (ἐπιστήμη ἐνοῦσα) those who are questioned (73a). Another possibility is put forward by Fine 2007, 353-360, who thinks that Socrates posits prenatal knowledge, but that this is then forgotten so completely that we cannot speak of latent knowledge, though we can speak of knowledge being “recovered”—much as we might recover a lost dog. The chief difficulty for her view is Socrates’ question Ἀρ’ οὖν οὐ τὴν ἐπιστήμην, ἢν νῦν ὁδὸς ἔχει, ἢτοι ἐλαβεν ποτε ἢ ἀεὶ ἔειχεν; (85d9-10). Fine must take the νῦν...ἔειχεν to refer not to the present but rather to the future time in which the slave will recover knowledge; simultaneously she must take ἐλαβεν and ἔειχεν as referring to a time in the distant past before the slave forgot the knowledge. Yet another possibility is raised by Gerson 2013, 164, who wants to invoke the distinction found in the Theaetetus (197a-d) between “having” (ἔχειν)
Socrates now uses this supposed latent knowledge as a basis for his argument for the immortality of the soul (85d-86b). Whereas earlier Socrates used the immortality of the soul as a postulate, drawn from traditional myth, in order to support the theory of recollection, he now argues in the other direction, using the theory of recollection to support immortality. Commentators have been puzzled by the bewildering array of cognitive terminology that Socrates uses in the argument: he speaks of the slave having knowledge (85d9), having opinions (85e7), having learned (86a1, a8), having true opinions (86a7), and having the truth (86b1). But sorting all this out is not important for evaluating the argument for immortality, since the proof ends up turning on “truth,” apparently understood as a generic term embracing both true opinion and knowledge.\textsuperscript{16}

The argument for immortality is not successful; rather it is baldly fallacious on multiple counts, which it is not my intention to catalogue in detail. Still, in order to notice some interesting assumptions, let me present the argument, as Socrates develops it in exchange with Meno, in schematized form:

1. The slave either (a) got the knowledge he now has at some time in the past or (b) always had it (85d9-10).
2. If (b), then he was always knowledgeable (85d12).
3. If (a), he would not have gotten the knowledge in this life now, since the slave has never been taught geometry by anyone (85d12-e6).
4. The slave has true opinions now (85e7, cf. 85b-c).
5. He must have gotten these opinions (and, \textit{a fortiori}, had them) in some other time (85e9-86a1). From [3]-[4].
6. This other time would have to be the time in which the slave’s soul was not a human being, i.e. was not incarnate in a human body (86a3-4).
7. The slave both has true opinions now and had them when he was not a human being (86a6-7). From [4]-[6].

and merely “possessing” (\textit{κεκτῆσθαι}) knowledge, such that the slave always possesses the knowledge, but only has it after recollecting it. This reading, though attractive, faces two obstacles. First, the terminology of “possession” is absent from the relevant passages in the \textit{Meno} and \textit{Phaedo}; here the slave is said to “have” the knowledge that strictly speaking he only “possesses.” Second, the distinction in the \textit{Theaetetus} seems designed to capture the difference between actively attending to knowledge and possessing knowledge without attending to it, though in such a way that we \textit{can} attend to it whenever we wish.

\textsuperscript{16}I here agree with Scott 2006, 118-120.
During all time (τὸν πάντα χρόνον) the soul either is or is not a human being (86a9-10).

During all time (τὸν ἀεὶ χρόνον) the soul is in a state of having learned (86a8-9). From [7]-[8].

The truth is always in the soul (86b1-2). From [1], [2], and [9].

The soul must always exist and thus is immortal. From [10].

The nub of the argument comes in [9]-[11]: if the truth is always in the soul, then the soul must always exist in order for the truth to be in it. Now the notion that the truth is always in the soul conflicts, on the face of it, with Socrates’ earlier mythical presentation of recollection (81c-e), according to which the soul “is immortal and has often been born, and has seen (ἐωρακυῖα) both what is here and what is in Hades.” This implies an initial moment of learning for the soul. In this later argument, the possibility of an initial learning is represented by option (a) in [1]. If the argument is to establish that the soul is literally immortal since the truth is always in it, option (a) must be ruled out.

It is easy for Socrates to rule out the possibility of an initial learning with regard to the slave’s present life: Meno readily agrees that no one has taught the slave anything about geometry (85e). As for the possibility of a prenatal initial learning, however, Socrates eliminates it only by a sophistic sleight-of-hand: from [5]-[6] he is entitled to conclude merely that the soul has true opinions at some time when it is not in a human body, but in [9] he assumes that the soul has true opinions whenever it is not in a human body. The argument thus does not really establish permanent prenatal existence, and thus falls short of showing immortality in the precise sense.

It might still seem like a non-trivial victory to have shown that the soul exists prior to birth at all, thus establishing even temporary prenatal existence. In this respect, however,

[17]In his reconstruction of the argument, Scott 2006, 112-118 thinks that in [3] Socrates wants to rule out possibility (a) entirely, such that there was never any initial learning at all. Scott thinks that this later passage presents Socrates’ actual, more rigorous view (which is distinct from the earlier mythical presentation). The obvious problem is that Socrates in fact seems to consider and reject (a) only with respect to this present life, leaving open the possibility that an initial learning occurred in an earlier discarnate existence exactly as the myth suggested. Scott points out that an initial learning is strictly speaking impossible if literally all learning is recollection; rather, we will have an infinite regress, which actually supports the soul’s immortality. But, as Scott himself admits, this is not how Socrates argues.
the argument seems simply circular: that the soul exists outside of the lifespan of the living human being is already assumed in [6]-[7], while is [8] it is assumed that the soul exists for all time (rather than, say, for a brief period prior to incarnation). The appearance of an argument is thus a smokescreen: the mythical picture with which Socrates began has not been placed on any firmer footing.

It is interesting that in offering this argument Socrates seems to disregard two obvious possibilities. One is that the initial learning occurred in a past embodied lifetime.\[18\] In [3]-[6], Socrates speaks as if the soul learned either in this life or in a disembodied state. This may be because Socrates does not actually take the mythical idea of reincarnation very seriously, but it probably also hints at an idea that will be prominent in the \textit{Phaedo}, namely that recollection pertains to a kind of knowledge that we cannot acquire while embodied. (The contingent fact that the slave happens not to have been taught geometry is thus actually irrelevant.)

The second possibility that Socrates seems to disregard is that the slave possesses or acquires the latent knowledge immediately upon birth. It might seem that Plato’s insight about the cognitive contribution of the “learner” might suggest the existence of latent knowledge that is merely innate rather than prenatal. Leibniz, a notable later advocate of innatism, criticized Plato for not adopting this simpler theory.\[19\] Now it might be thought that “innate ideas” in the style of Leibniz require a theological apparatus to explain their origin.\[20\] But Plato’s theory of recollection is hardly in a better position: the soul’s prenatal encounter with the truth also requires a mythological explanation (as offered in the \textit{Phaedrus}). A theory of innate ideas neither requires nor suggests the immortality of the soul.

\[18\] I thank Brooke Holmes for bringing this point to my attention.

\[19\] In his \textit{Discours de Métaphysique} (published in 1686): “Et rien ne nous saurait être appris, dont nous n’ayons déjà dans l’esprit l’idée qui est comme la matière dont cette pensée se forme. C’est ce que Platon a excellemment bien considéré, quand il a mis en avant sa réminiscence qui a beaucoup de solidité, pourvu qu’on la prenne bien, qu’on la purge de l’erreur de la préexistence, et qu’on ne s’imagine point que l’âme doit déjà avoir su et pensé distinctement autrefois ce qu’elle apprend et pense maintenant” (26).

There is, I think, a subtle nod in the argument to the possibility of innate ideas, having to do with the ambiguity of the term “always” (ἀεί) in [1]. In isolation, the dilemma in [1] is perhaps most plausibly taken to mean that the slave either (a) got the opinions at some time or (b) had them for the entirety of his present life (ἀεί). Now (b) even on this reading looks unpromising, but Socrates quickly moves to eliminate (a). The fact that he does so with reference only to the slave’s present life encourages the more natural reading of the initial ἀεί in (b), as referring to the slave’s entire lifespan. In other words, in [1]-[4] we have no reason at all to be thinking about discarnate existence—which is then introduced, illegitimately, in [5]. In what follows, Socrates will take ἀεί as equivalent to “for all time” (τὸν ἀεὶ χρόνον). For [10]-[11] to follow, this broader meaning must be read back in [1]-[2]. Socrates could easily have had a better argument for innate rather than prenatal existence, without the circular reliance on the notion of the soul’s disembodied existence.

At any rate, Socrates next connects the results of the argument for immortality, taken at face value, with the earlier problems about inquiry and discovery:

SOCRATES: But if the truth about the things that are is always in our soul, the soul would be immortal, so that we must be confident and try to search and recollect (θαρροῦντα χρή ἐπιχειρεῖν ζητεῖν καὶ ἀναμιμνῄσκεσθαι) what we do not know now—that is, what we do not remember.

MENO: You seem to me to speak well, Socrates, though I’m not sure how.

SOCRATES: I think so too, Meno. The other things I would not assert with certainty (οὐκ ἂν πάντα...διϊσχυρισαίμην) on behalf of the logos. But that if we think that one must search for what one doesn’t know we would be better and manlier and less lazy than if we think that it is not possible to find nor do we need to search for what we do not know, about that I would definitely fight (διαμαχοίμην), if able, in both word and deed. (86a-c)

In tentative language that he also uses elsewhere in discussions of the afterlife, 21 Socrates disavows certainty about “the other things,” i.e. recollection and the immortality of the soul. This is a striking admission that both the experiment with the slave and the recent argument for immortality may be unsatisfactory. Socrates does, however, make a strong claim that

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21The verb διϊσχυρίζεσθαι is a semi-technical term for Plato in similar contexts: cf. e.g. Phaedo 63c and 114d, Meno 86b, Republic 533a, Timaeus 72d.
inquiry is obligatory: “we must try to search and recollect” regarding what we do not know. This, it seems, not immortality, has been Socrates’ real interest all along.

As I have said, a conviction about the value of philosophical inquiry lies at the basis of Socrates’ way of life. Given that his investigations do not lead him to knowledge about what he investigates, it must be the activity of searching itself that is valuable. Here in the *Meno*, Socrates accordingly asserts the value of a belief that we must inquire: he is willing to “fight” for the view that we will be better off if we “think that one must search” (οἰόμενοι δεῖν ζητεῖν). A similar appeal to the pragmatic benefits of belief in the possibility of inquiry is implied in Socrates’ earlier remark that the theory of recollection “makes us diligent and eager to search” (81d-e). This appears to be the first explicit pragmatic argument in the history of Western philosophy.²²

What exactly is the benefit at issue here? Socrates here says that a belief in the possibility of inquiry will make us “better and manlier and less lazy” (βελτίους καὶ ἀνδρικώτεροι καὶ ἥττον ἀργοί, 86b). This contrasts with Meno’s eristic argument, which “makes us lazy (ἁργοῖς) and is pleasant for soft (μαλακοῖς) human beings to hear” (81d). Here as elsewhere Socrates describes his philosophical ideal in a way that draws on the contemporary ideology of masculinity.²³ This is perhaps a choice calculated to appeal to Meno, who thinks that men and women have different virtues (cf. 71e), but also possibly an indication of how the philosophical way of life is ultimately grounded in commitments not derived from rational consideration. We should be precise, however, about what this “manliness” in philosophy means: while Socrates thinks we should be confident (θαρρεῖν) about the continuous pursuit of philosophical investigation, he does not “make assertions with certainty” (διϊσχυρίζεσθαι) about its results. “Manliness” is not simply making bold claims. What Socrates would “fight” for is simply the philosophical way of life itself.

Throughout this passage—as in his earlier statement of the “eristic argument”—Socrates’ emphasis is on the importance of inquiry. A reference to the problem of discovery is found

²³Cf. Loraux 1989, 185-189, with regard to the *Phaedo*. 
only in the view that Socrates condemns on pragmatic grounds, namely that “it is not 
possible to find nor do we need to search” (μηδὲ δυνατὸν εὑρεῖν μηδὲ δεῖν ζητεῖν). The 
view that Socrates advocates (inquiry is obligatory) and the view he condemns (inquiry is 
not obligatory and discovery is not possible) are thus not precisely parallel. Now clearly 
the positive and negative recommendations are connected. If we thought that discovery 
was in principle impossible, this would discourage us from inquiry (i.e. make us lazy) just 
as much as, if not more than, the view that inquiry is not obligatory. Yet Socrates here 
carefully avoids asserting that discovery is in principle possible and his own dialectical 
investigations provide no direct evidence that it is.

As I see it, Socrates here faces a psychological problem that would have been familiar to 
later Pyrrhonian skeptics. Like the Pyrrhonians—who after all call themselves “examiners” 
(σκεπτικοί) and also “eager to search” (ζητητικοί)—Socrates wants to insist on the value of 
philosophical inquiry as a central human activity. To the problem of inquiry, Socrates and 
the Pyrrhonians thus both need a response: searching must be possible, at least in practice. 
The situation is different with regard to the problem of discovery. On the one hand, the 
skeptics do not want to claim that discovery is in principle impossible, as this would render 
searching absurd. On the other hand, they do not need to show that discovery is in principle 
possible. In order to ground a way of life based on philosophical inquiry, all they need is for 
this to be an open question. But how can this open outlook be maintained given that the 
investigations that they carry out are reliably unsuccessful or inconclusive? What evidence 
that discovery is possible can balance the overwhelming weight of the facts?

24 Pace Scott 2006, 82, who takes this passage (86b-c) to indicate that Socrates thinks that recollection 
solves the “problem of discovery.”
25 I speak here of the Socrates of Plato’s so-called “aporetic” dialogues. It is beyond my scope here to 
consider the implications of the apparently successful search for definitions of justice and other virtues in 
the Republic. There Socrates is clearly not conducting a search under the same strict constraints that he 
imposes on Meno or Euthyphro. He does not, for instance, worry about why justice, temperance, etc. are 
all called virtues, nor is he concerned by the fact that a just action and a just soul will be called “just” for 
very different reasons.
26 The term ζητητικός is attested here in Plato’s Meno for the first time in Greek. It later became an 
alternative name for the Pyrrhonian school (Diogenes Laertius IX.69-70; Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrhonian 
Outlines I.7).
The Pyrrhonians can escape this difficulty because a different outcome—tranquility of mind based on suspension of judgment—covertly replaces discovery as the aim of their searching. Whether or not this contradicts their claim to be engaged in a genuine search is not important for us here. In any case, Socrates in the *Meno* takes a different path by offering the myth of recollection. The liminal status of mythical discourse is important here. Socrates does not endorse the myth as literally true, nor does he need to. Its function is psychological: the myth encourages us and keeps us from falling into despair about philosophical inquiry. According to this reading, Plato’s Socrates in the *Meno* is still very much the proto-skeptical figure that we see in the *Apology*. The theory of recollection is motivated by a very real concern about the coherence of this proto-skeptical stance; it is not intended as a dogmatic answer to the problem of discovery.

There is an obvious objection to this analysis: in Socrates’ experiment, the slave does find out the answer to the geometrical problem. This may not really demonstrate the possibility of discovery; what the slave achieves amounts to merely true opinion. Yet Socrates does claim that with more practice the slave will achieve real knowledge. Although Socrates does not substantiate this claim, it seems both independently plausible and consonant with Socrates’ statement later in the *Meno* that true opinions become knowledge when they are “tied down” with explanations (98a). This epistemological optimism sounds nothing like skepticism. More generally, it does seem that geometry, arithmetic, etc. can provide us with paradigm instances of knowledge and discovery. Although the Pyrrhonians did attack the legitimacy of these disciplines, Socrates and Plato never make a move in this direction.

A reply to this objection involves the distinction between moral and non-moral knowledge and inquiry.\(^{27}\) After all, Socrates in the *Apology* says that he goes around having conver-

\(^{27}\)So Weiss [2001], who stresses the importance of this distinction. She holds that Socrates in the *Meno* does not aim to solve the problem of discovery as regards moral knowledge: “he recognizes that with respect to the issue of virtue he cannot answer it: it is in virtue inquiry that one will indeed not know that one has found the answer one seeks even if one does happen upon it” (p. 61). Weiss seems to hold that Socrates is a negative dogmatist: “Socrates wants desperately to know about moral matters... Nevertheless, he does not think it possible for him, or others, to know. ... His ideal goal, however, unattainable as it may be, is knowledge” (p. 10). Weiss does not give any explanation of how this could be a coherent position, nor does she defend the view that Socrates is actually committed in principle to the impossibility of moral knowledge.
sations about virtue, not about geometry. One obvious difference between the experiment with the slave and the conversation with Meno is that the former involves a rather simple geometrical relationship, the latter a debatable moral concept. In the discussion of disagreement in the *Euthyphro* that I alluded to earlier, Socrates distinguishes between two kinds of dispute: those that can be resolved through appeals to counting, measuring, and weighing, and those that involve “the just and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad” (7b-d). Socrates does not say that the second kind of dispute cannot be resolved, but he does not say how this can be done, either. This passage shows, at least, that Plato’s Socrates has at his disposal a clear distinction between moral and non-moral questions. Admittedly, Socrates does not make any such distinction in the *Meno*. But we should not be surprised by this. Calling attention to the distinction would be counter-productive, given how his entire strategy depends on presenting the cases of geometrical and moral inquiry as parallel. If discovery is possible in the former, he wants to suggest, then it is in the latter as well. In this way, the geometrical experiment works like the myth of recollection as a psychological device to encourage Meno to engage in philosophical investigation. In sum it in the first place (she calls this one of her work’s “assumptions”). Finally, although I agree that the difference between moral and non-moral knowledge is important, Weiss does not seem to have a satisfactory account of it, such that the latter is possible but the former is not. It is merely begging the question to say, as Weiss does, that in ethics “everyone has a different opinion, and even if some opinions are true and others false, there is no final way to settle the matter” (p. 9).

28It might seem that Plato sees moral knowledge as fundamentally continuous with mathematics. In the seventh book of the *Republic*, Plato’s Socrates does famously suggest that the study of disciplines like geometry are a proper prelude to dialectic, leading to the understanding of the Form of the Good and preparing one to rule over the political community. [Burnyeat 2000, 76](#) argues that this is because the mathematical sciences involve notions like “concord, proportion, and order,” which are also “value-concepts.” I cannot here to comment on the merits of Burnyeat’s interpretation either as a reading of Plato or as a philosophical position; suffice to say that nothing like it is suggested by the *Meno*. We can explain the position of the *Republic* either in terms of a development in Plato’s view away from a more “Socratic” position or as a grander and more elaborate application of the same rhetorical strategy that is found in the *Meno*.

29In his initial, mythical presentation of the theory of recollection, Socrates accordingly suggests that the soul has “seen all things” and can recollect “both about virtue and about other things” (81c-d). Taken literally, this seems impossibly broad. Later, after the experiment, Socrates suggests a narrower scope: the slave can recollect “concerning all geometry and all other subjects of learning” (85e). Socrates may mean to include moral questions among the “subjects of learning” (μαθήματα). But his point might be more plausibly taken to be that the slave can make progress only with regard to topics with a systematic or axiomatic structure, like geometry. So the distinction between moral and non-moral topics may be at least hinted at in the *Meno*.
seems possible to attribute to Socrates a skepticism restricted to moral terms and questions, though this idea certainly needs to be further refined.

I have explained how Socrates’ mythical presentation of recollection is motivated by a problem rooted in his very conception of the philosophical life. Before moving on, we might ask: why does Socrates also bring up the immortality of the soul in the *Meno* at all? On the interpretation I have presented, it might seem strictly superfluous. Why does Socrates not rest content (as I have suggested he could) with a theory of innate ideas? In reply, I see two reasons why Socrates brings up immortality in the *Meno*.

First, there is a non-incidental connection between a general defense of the coherence of Socrates’ philosophical way of life and the immortality of the soul. As I will discuss at length in the next chapter, philosophy requires combatting the fear of death. This is a way in which *logoi* about the immortality of the soul (even unsound ones) can improve us. The prospect of Socrates’ own death for the sake of philosophy looms large in the *Meno*: later in the dialogue he will have an unfriendly exchange (ending in an ominous warning) with his future accuser Anytus (89e-95a).

The second reason has to do with the character of Meno, who is portrayed throughout the dialogue (and elsewhere) as hungry for money and power (e.g. in the definitions of virtue he proposes). He nonetheless is not immune to the force of conventional morality: he volunteers without complaint, for instance, that justice and moderation are virtues or parts of virtue (73a, 73e-74a). At the point in the dialogue where recollection is introduced, however, Meno has just been brought to a paralyzing awareness that his opinions about virtue are false. At the analogous moment during the experiment with the slave, Meno and Socrates agree, plausibly, that the slave has benefited from being made aware of his own ignorance about geometry (84b-c). But it is not obvious that being shown one’s ignorance about moral matters is always similarly beneficial: perhaps it is better to leave even imperfect opinions

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30 Philosophers are in this way like warriors, as Socrates himself hints with his martial vocabulary at 86b.
in place rather than to risk destabilizing one’s attitude towards morality as a whole. Meno’s encounter with Socrates exemplifies this risk: what if the failed search in fact weakens Meno’s nominal commitment to virtue? It is in this context that Socrates brings up the immortality of the soul as a reason to “live life as piously as possible” (81b). Besides attempting to get Meno to continue the inquiry, Socrates thus also (as for Callicles in the Gorgias) introduces a non-philosophical incentive for moral behavior based on the afterlife.

5.2 Knowledge in Socrates’ Defense (Phaedo 63b-69e)

The most obvious difference between how the theory of recollection is presented in the Meno and in the Phaedo is that in the latter dialogue it explicitly involves the so-called Forms, characterized in the Affinity Argument as eternal, unchanging, uniform entities to which the soul is in some special way related (§2.1). This difference can be seen as part of a larger contrast between the two dialogues. In the Meno, Socrates’ role as the allegedly ignorant questioner recalls his stance in the Apology, where he claims not to know anything important. His introduction of the theory of recollection is, I have argued, motivated by this skeptical stance. In the Phaedo, by contrast, Socrates appears to be a far more dogmatic figure, with complex metaphysical commitments (including both the immortality of the soul and the theory of Forms). This is often explained as the result of a development in Plato’s literary strategy: in the Phaedo Plato is no longer representing (some version of) the views of the historical Socrates, as in the Apology, but rather presenting his own views using the literary character of Socrates as a mouthpiece. In fact this contrast is illusory.

Early on in the Phaedo, Simmias and Cebes challenge Socrates about his apparent willingness to go to his death so easily. Socrates undertakes to defend his choice by arguing that it is “likely that a man who has really spent his life in philosophy should be confident when

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32 There is, however, not necessarily any incompatibility between the dialogues, nor do we need to posit a development in Plato’s thought. The difference is explicable on dramatic grounds: Simmias and Cebes are more friendly and philosophical than Meno.

33 The view is ubiquitous, but is presented in detail in Vlastos 1991, e.g. p. 33n44: “in the Phaedo authentic Socratic material is used to introduce (57a-64a) and cap (115a to the end) the no less authentically Platonic philosophical argument of the dialogue.”
about to die and be of good hope that there he will obtain the greatest goods once he has
met his end” (63e-64a). Since Socrates compares this argument at both its beginning and
its end to a forensic speech, an ἀπολογία (63b-d, 69d-e), this section of the Phaedo (63b-69e)
is known to scholars as Socrates’ Defense. This is the passage where the Forms are first
introduced in the Phaedo. I will argue that the picture of the philosophical life that Socrates
presents there, whereby the body is such a hindrance to cognition that pure knowledge (of
the Forms) can only be attained after death, in fact supports a skeptical perspective.

The argument of the Defense can be briefly outlined. Socrates begins with the famous
and surprising claim that philosophers “practice nothing else than dying and being dead”
(64a). This, he explains, is because death is “the release of the soul from the body” (64c),
and philosophers are people who “release the soul as much as possible from partnership with
the body” (65a) while still alive, with the aim of allowing the soul to go off “on its own
by itself (αὐτῇ καθ᾽ αὐτῆν), leaving the body behind” (65c). Philosophers therefore do not
fear but rather look forward to death, when this separation will be completed, and to life in
Hades, since “nowhere else will they purely (καθαρῶς) encounter intelligence” (68b).

The Defense thus offers a striking and unusual portrait of the philosophical life as a
process of “purification” (κάθαρσις) of the soul from bodily concerns. This language of
“purification” that Socrates uses so frequently is borrowed from the domains of religious cult
and medicine. One puzzling detail of the Defense is that Socrates constantly attributes
the attitudes and behaviors he describes not to himself or to philosophers tout court, but

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34 Words from the καθαρ- root appear some thirteen times in the Defense. Purity is an important motif in
the so-called Orphic gold tablets (cf. the texts collected in Edmonds 2011), and this is apparently the primary
association for Socrates. Plato has already drawn our attention to κάθαρσις as religious term by having Phaedo
mention that Socrates’ execution was delayed because of a ritual purity requirement (καθαρεύειν τὴν πόλιν,
58b). What, if any, importance the notion of κάθαρσις had in specifically Pythagorean cult is disputed;
cannot explore here further the intriguing connections between the cultic and medical uses. I disagree with
the general thrust of Wildberg 2007, who argues that the concept of κάθαρσις as a rational process was as it
were a native element in Socratic thought; it seems to me that in the Phaedo it is meant to appear rather as
a surprising borrowing. Wildberg supports his view in part with a misleading translation of ὅπερ πάλαι ἐν
τῷ λόγῳ λέγεται at 67c5-6 as “wovon schon immer die Rede gewesen ist” (p. 231). These words could refer
to the current conversation (though probably not to previous conversations), but the formula πάλαι...λέγεται
more plausibly suggests a reference to religious traditions; cf. parallels at 63c6 and 70c5.
rather to “true” or “genuine” philosophers. He refers to this group in various ways: as we have seen, he says at first that he is speaking about “a man who has really (τῷ ὄντι) spent his life in philosophy” (63e9-10), but he later refers to “those who correctly (ὀρθῶς) take up philosophy” (64a4-5), “those who are truly (ὡς ἀληθῶς) philosophers (64b9), “those who are genuinely (γνησίως) philosophers” (66b2), and so on. I will return to the significance of this device later.

Why should philosophy involve the release of the soul from the body? Socrates initially seems to present this as a merely descriptive claim about “those who are truly philosophers” (64d-e), but there turns out to be a complex justification for this tendency. Socrates first claims that the body can contribute nothing towards the acquisition of intelligence and the search for truth, as the bodily senses are “neither precise nor clear” (65b). It is rather the soul on its own that grasps truth through reasoning (65b-c).

Socrates does not further explain this sweeping criticism of sense perception, which can be taken in various ways. The senses do sometimes give deceptive or conflicting reports, and are subject to various limitations (we cannot see things clearly when far away, in the dark, and so on). Some things the senses cannot perceive at all: for instance, the soul, the gods, and the Forms, which are introduced at this point for the first time in the *Phaedo*:

SOCRATES: Do we say that something is just on its own (φαμέν τι εἶναι δίκαιον αὐτό), or nothing?
SIMMIAS: We do say so, by Zeus!
SOCRATES: And something beautiful and something good?
SIMMIAS: Of course.
SOCRATES: Have you ever seen any of these things with your eyes?
SIMMIAS: Not at all.
SOCRATES: Well, have you ever grasped them through any other of the senses that work through the body? I’m talking about everything, like largeness, health, strength, and the rest—in sum, about the being (οὐσίας) of all of them, what each really is. (65d)

What Socrates is referring to here is much debated. The traditional interpretation is that the theory of Forms is alluded to here as a metaphysical view already familiar to and accepted by

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35Cf. similar phrases at 64b4, 64e2, 67b4, 67d8, 67e4, 68b2-3, 69d2, 80e6, 82c3, 83b6, 83e5.
all the participants in the dialogue, the members of Socrates’ inner circle. Simmias’s enthusiastic response to Socrates’ initial question is due to his acquaintance with a kind of esoteric school doctrine. Phrases like “the beautiful on its own” (αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν) are used to refer to the Forms as separate metaphysical entities in other dialogues as well (cf. e.g. Parmenides 134b, Symposium 211d-e).

Against this traditional view, it has been pointed out that nothing here suggests explicitly that metaphysically independent entities are at issue; moreover, quasi-technical terms like εἶδος and ἰδέα are absent. Might Socrates be merely making the (plausible) point that moral qualities, taken in the abstract, cannot be perceived by the senses? Perhaps a “theory of Forms” should not be read into the Phaedo at all: what Socrates refers to here are merely concepts of the sort that might be the object of his familiar dialectical searches in dialogues like the Meno.

A compromise position, which I will adopt here, is that Socrates’ aim in the Phaedo is to present an implicit argument for the theory of Forms as a metaphysical view. His strategy is to explain, to an audience already familiar with his dialectical investigations of moral concepts, how this practice might suggest or call for a theory of metaphysically separate Forms. Thus in two later passages dealing with the Forms, Socrates emphasizes that they are the object of investigation through questions and answers (75d, 78d). On this reading, Socrates’ basic concerns are continuous with those in the Meno: the positing of the Forms is a response to a different version of the problem of discovery. When Socrates and

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36 Cf. e.g. Gallop 1975, 97.
37 The term εἶδος is not used in the Phaedo to refer to a Form until 102b (and then later at 103e, 104c, and 106d), but this use is to some extent prepared for by its appearance in the Recollection Argument at 73d, to be discussed in the next section. The word ἰδέα occurs only in the Phaedo only in 104b-105d, always in an apparently technical sense. It is true that when these terms are introduced it is without any explanation, but note that Phaedo at 102a-b merely briefly summarizes a portion of the discussion that he does not recount in detail, during which, he says, the existence of the Forms was “agreed to.”
38 So Lee 2013. Lee gives a clear and helpful overview of previous positions, but entirely ignores the Affinity Argument, a section of the Phaedo quite difficult to square with his deflationary view.
39 Such a view is argued for by Dimas 2003, who, however, sees this as evidence that Plato in writing the Phaedo is developing Socratic ideas in a new, non-Socratic direction. My reading of the Phaedo is not meant to depend on any account of Plato’s own development away from the supposed views of the historical Socrates.
his interlocutors search for definitions of terms like “the pious” or “the just”—as opposed to particular pious or just actions—what is it exactly that they are searching for? Is the *definiendum* anything that actually exists? If not, can the search succeed? Must not a good definition actually apply to something that exists? The theory of Forms supplies an answer to these worries.

Let us return to the argument of the Defense. Socrates has held that philosophy involves the investigation of entities inaccessible to the bodily senses. Still, even if we grant that the body can make no positive contribution to philosophizing, this alone would not require that the philosopher seek release from it. Socrates therefore must advance the further idea that the body is an actual impediment to the practice of philosophy.

The crucial passage is not spoken by Socrates *in propria persona*, but is rather attributed by him to some imagined “genuine philosophers” (οἱ γνησίως φιλόσοφοι) whom he quotes at length (66b-67b). These people will say to one another, Socrates claims, that “as long as we have a body and our soul is mixed up with so great an evil, we will never sufficiently acquire what we desire: namely, we say, the truth” (66b). They then go on to catalogue the evils forced on the soul by the body (66b-d). The body causes “endless preoccupations” through its need of nourishment and care, which in turn require the acquisition of money, which in turn causes conflict and war. The soul is also subject to the body’s affections, including not only sickness but also the emotions: “loves and appetites and fears and all kinds of illusions and lots of nonsense.” Given all this, the genuine philosophers conclude:

“It has really been shown to us that if we are ever going to know anything purely (καθαρῶς τι εἴσεσθαι), we must be released from it [i.e. the body] and observe the things themselves with the soul on its own. Then, it is likely, we will have what we desire and say that we are lovers of, intelligence – once we have died, as the argument suggests, but not while we are alive. For if it is not possible to know anything purely with the body, one of two things follows: either it is not possible to acquire knowledge anywhere, or it is possible for the dead. For then the soul will be on its own by itself, apart from the body, but not before. In the time when we are alive, it is likely that we will be closest to knowledge if we have as much as possible no contact or partnership with the body, unless entirely necessary.” (66d-67a)
Here the genuine philosophers hold that the acquisition of intelligence (φρόνησις) and “pure knowledge” is not possible in this life. These things either (1) are simply impossible for human beings to acquire ever or (2) can only be acquired after death, when the soul is separated from the body. Obviously (2) is only a viable option if the soul continues to exist.

Clearly a special, very stringent standard for what counts as “knowledge” is in play here. Although Socrates does not say this explicitly, it seems clear that this knowledge is of the Forms. For the “genuine philosophers,” after all, the objects of knowledge must be the sort of thing that can be experienced in a disembodied afterlife. “Pure knowledge,” then, not only cannot be achieved through perception but in fact requires a kind of contact with the Forms that is impossible under embodied conditions. Perhaps, though, a dimmer or partial acquaintance with the Forms is also possible, resulting in an “impure” kind of knowledge or at least something “close” to knowledge (cf. 65e).

This is supported by how Socrates later presents a further, stronger consideration in favor of asceticism (again, on behalf of the genuine philosophers) in his reprise of the concerns of the Defense after the Affinity Argument. The body and the senses are not merely a distraction, but actually corrupt the soul’s sense of truth:

“The soul of the one who is truly a philosopher (ἡ τοῦ ὡς ἀληθῶς φιλοσόφου ψυχή) will restrain itself from pleasures and appetites and pains and fears as much as it can, reasoning that, whenever someone has a strong pleasure or fear or pain or appetite, they don’t just experience from this the kind of evil that one might think, as when one has gotten sick or spent all of something because of appetites, but rather the greatest and most extreme of all evils ... [namely] that the soul of every human being is compelled, whenever it feels great pleasure or pain, also to consider that in relation to which it experiences this to be most manifest and most true (ἐναργέστατόν τε καὶ ἀληθέστατον), when it is not.” (83b-c)

The body and the senses, then, constantly deceive the soul by forcing it to consider the perceptible world that is immediately and inevitably present to it to be true, when in fact it is not. It is instead the class of immutable, invisible beings familiar from the Affinity

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40Socrates sometimes describes the objects of philosophical investigation with the term “unadulterated” (εἰλικρινής, 66a2-3, 67b1). This is apparently a synonym for “pure” (καθαρός), but is also a term that Plato uses elsewhere to describe the Forms (cf. Republic 477a-479d, Symposium 211e).
Argument, i.e. the Forms, that constitutes the “true” world. In order to remain oriented towards the truth, so understood, the “true philosopher” must avoid both bodily pleasure and pain as much as possible.

Socrates’ apparent advocacy for asceticism as essential to the practice of philosophy exercised an enormous influence on ancient Platonism. To modern commentators, by contrast, the Defense has presented a twofold puzzle. First, Socrates’ antagonism here towards the body and its affects, the force of which is not paralleled elsewhere in Plato’s dialogues, seems wildly exaggerated and insufficiently defended. While philosophers may be less concerned, relative to other people, with activities and pleasures besides than those of intellect, this need not be an all-or-nothing affair! Second, Socrates himself does not seem to fit the extreme portrait he draws: the presence of his wife and young child in the Phaedo (60a), for instance, suggest an interest in family and sex well into old age.

A reply to these worries should begin by clearly distinguishing between pessimism about the effects of embodiment on cognition and advocacy of an ascetic lifestyle in response. The first position is, I think, at least plausible, if not for precisely the reasons that Socrates supplies. Embodiment subjects us to various kinds of finitude, including a limited lifespan of which only a small portion can be devoted to thinking and investigation, due to the pressure

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41 Plotinus, for instance, cites Phaedo 63b-69e 32 times in the Enneads, according to the Index Fontium in the Oxford text of Henry and Schwzyzer. (He cites the entire Theaetetus the same number of times.) The passage is also the source of one of the latest quotations (a free translation of 66b-67a, omitting 66c4-d3) from the Phaedo in the Latin West, in the De statu animae (II.7) by the fifth-century Gallic Christian priest Claudianus Mamertus.

42 Gallop 1975, 88 says of the Defense: “nowhere else in Plato is asceticism so uncompromisingly extolled.” Similarly Frede 1999, 173: “In keinem der späteren Dialoge manifestiert sich die Ausrichtung auf das Jenseits mit einer vergleichbaren Rigorosität. Ob Platon sich hier nur der Situation und des Themas wegen so sehr gegen Leben und Leiblichkeit ausspricht, oder ob er eine Phase tiefster Skepsis gegen alles Körperliche durchlebt hat, ist schwer zu sagen.” In the Republic, Socrates limits himself to a more narrowly descriptive claim, explaining the desires of a philosopher with the metaphor of a stream partially diverted in a new channel, weakening the original current (485d). In the Timaeus, Plato seems to take a much more positive overall view of the body’s role in cognition, as Johansen 2004, 137-159 argues.

43 Cf. Woolf 2004, who responds by reading the Defense as advocating a philosophical practice based not on asceticism (in the sense of actual abstinence from certain behaviors) but on merely an evaluative stance that accords everything connected with the body little value. This is ingenious but ultimately lacking textual support: Woolf admits that later passages (e.g. 83b-c) seem to demand the “ascetic” reading, which he admits Socrates does not live up to. Butler 2012 effectively counters many of Woolf’s specific points, though his overall reading of the Phaedo as a sincere argument for asceticism is also unconvincing.
of bodily needs. It makes us reliant on our bodily senses, which, if not always deceptive, are at the very least fallible. It makes us inhabit an individual perspective that differs from and is not easily compared with that of others. It also makes us subject to various non-rational affections, some merely distracting (hunger, headaches), others possibly creating distorting biases in our thinking (e.g. love, competitiveness, and the fear of death).

As to the advocacy of asceticism, Plato does in fact elsewhere describe Socrates as indifferent to many worldly concerns and capable of unusual feats of endurance and self-control. So it is not the case that Socrates entirely rejects the ascetic ideal. Nonetheless, Socrates’ device of continually referring this ideal to the “genuine philosophers”—a group of which he never claims to be a member—also serves to distance him from it. Peterson goes too far, however, in claiming that the “genuine philosophers” are merely an ironic caricature of the observant Pythagoreans that (according to Peterson) Simmias and Cebers aspire to be like.

My view is rather that the “genuine philosophers” do represent a real ideal for Socrates, as the hypothetical adherents of an extremely stringent standard for the acquisition of wisdom. Socrates accepts the validity of this stringent standard, yet recognizes that he himself does not (fully) meet it. Hence his denials of being wise in the Apology and elsewhere.

44In offering this defense of the Defense, I am inspired by Pyrrhonian skepticism, in particular by the first four τρόποι of Aenesidemus (cf. Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrhonian Outlines I.40-117). There seems to me to be an important and little acknowledged kinship between the Platonic denigration of embodiment as detrimental to cognition and skeptical strategies for advocating the suspension of judgment.

45See Peterson 2011, 182-193, who rightly argues that this term is not meant by Socrates to be a self-description. Socrates’ Defense can be compared to another famous portrait in Plato of the philosopher as an ascetic, the Digression in the Theaetetus (172c-177c), on which see Peterson 2011, 59-89. Similarly, in Republic VI, Socrates is concerned to distinguish true from false philosophers, often using language reminiscent of the Phaedo (cf. e.g. 476b, 485e, 489a, 490d, 491b); here too it does not seem that Socrates himself is an instance of the ideal type he describes.

46Notice that at both the beginning and the end of the Defense, Socrates refers explicitly to his earlier speech before the Athenian jury and expresses the hope that his present ἀπολογία will be “more persuasive” (cf. 63b, 68d-e). Although in both cases Socrates is defending himself against a challenge of some sort, the comparison seems rather inexact: in most of his earlier speech, Socrates was (at least nominally) trying to avoid being sentenced to death, not explaining why he would welcome it. We can now see how the Defense functions as an improvement on the earlier speech in a different way: in the Phaedo Socrates provides an explanation for a claim fundamental to his representation of himself and his philosophical activity in the Apology, a claim that the jury found especially outrageous—namely, that he lacks wisdom. Paradoxically, Socrates’ assertions of ignorance are often incredible to his interlocutors—who thus accuse him of “dissemblance” (εἰρωνεία).

203
The “genuine philosophers” in the *Phaedo* are thus in some respects similar to the later figure of the Stoic sage or wise person. Although the Stoic sage is much less ascetic and withdrawn than the “genuine philosopher” described by Socrates, both are epistemological ideals that can be described even if they are perhaps never instantiated. So Cicero, for instance, speaks of the one “in whom wisdom will be truly complete, of whom we have seen so far no example,” although “what he will be like, if he ever exists, has been set forth in the statements of the philosophers” (*Tusculan Disputations* II.51). Sextus Empiricus likewise reports that for the Stoics only the sage “has stable knowledge of the truth,” although up to now such a person has not been found: even leading Stoics like Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus denied that they held this status (*Against the Mathematicians* VII.432-434). From the Stoic views that Sextus cites, it follows that no one or virtually no one has knowledge in the strict sense.

Socrates’ Defense—a *locus classicus* for traditions of dogmatic Platonism disdainful of the body and its concerns—likewise contains an argument amenable to a skeptic: knowledge is so difficult to obtain, given the obstacles posed by embodiment, that no one possesses it. Admittedly, sometimes all that Socrates says is that embodiment makes “pure” knowledge impossible. This seems to leave open the possibility that some lesser type of cognitive achievement is available to us, but what this might be is left vague. Interestingly, the term “opinion” (δόξα) is almost totally absent from the Defense. The genuine philosophers hold that it is through asceticism that we can come “closest to knowledge” (65e, 67a). But the fact that there will always be a gap between what we can achieve and true knowledge might seem to render this kind of progress quixotic, explaining Socrates’ only half-hearted embrace of the genuine philosophers’ practice.

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48 Cicero does not actually specify that he is referring to the Stoic ideal here, but he almost certainly has the Stoics in mind; cf. *De finibus* IV.65, *De divinatione* II.61.
49 The two occurrences of the noun δόξα (66b2, 69d2) and the one occurrence of the verb δοξάζειν (67b4) all refer to the contention that only those separated from the body will obtain knowledge.
At any rate, on the picture from the Defense, for the soul not to survive death would have the stark epistemological consequence that humans would never know anything in the strict sense. If the soul survives death, however, then this is not the whole story, since human beings will be able to acquire pure knowledge after the soul is separated from the body at death. Speaking of “those who philosophize correctly,” Socrates says:

“Thus someone really in love with intelligence, and setting great store in this very hope, that he will get intelligence worthy of account nowhere else than in Hades, will he be annoyed at death and not go to it gladly? One must think that he would go gladly—at least if, comrade, he is really a philosopher (τῷ ὄντι φιλόσοφος). For he will be strongly of the opinion that he will purely obtain intelligence (ἐντεύξεσθαι [φρόνησε] ἀξίως λόγου) nowhere else than there. If this is the case, then as I just said, wouldn’t it be great irrationality for such a man to fear death?” (67e-68b)

Socrates’s wording here recalls his interpretation of the Delphic oracle in the *Apology*, to the effect that “the god is really wise (τῷ ὄντι…σοφός), and in this oracle was really saying this, that human wisdom is worth little or nothing” (亸λόγου των ἀξία ἐστὶν καὶ οὐδενός, 23a).

The effect of the Defense, then, might seem to be to raise the stakes on the question of the soul’s postmortem survival. At this point in the *Phaedo*, however, Socrates has made no move to argue for this position. He has simply stated his tentative belief in an afterlife, without supplying a justification (63b-c); as Cebes will soon complain, many people do not share this confidence (69e-70b). Socrates is moreover vague about the divine postmortem wisdom that philosophers aspire to: one might well wonder what the entirely disembodied contemplation of Forms like goodness or justice (or “largeness, health, and strength”) would be like or why it would be a supremely desirable goal.\footnote{This objection is discussed by Frede 1999, 21-33, who tries to lessen the tension in Socrates’ position, but does not entirely resolve it. She concludes: “Daß das reine Denken der vollkommen von allem Irdischen abgelösten Vernunft nur ein Grenzbegriff ist, erhebt daraus, daß Platon sich auch innerhalb des Mythos [at the end of the dialogue] über die höchste Stufe des Jenseits ausschweigt. Wir erfahren weder, wohin der Philosoph geht, noch was er dort erkennt. Über diesen höchsten Punkt seiner Existenz sagt Platon kein einziges Wort.”}

The real point of Socrates’ praise of the afterlife’s cognitive advantages is thus effectively to emphasize his very low estimation of our cognitive abilities in the here and now.
We can fit together the interpretation of the Defense offered here with the Affinity Argument from later in the *Phaedo* (cf. § 2.1). There Socrates describes the relationship of the soul to the Forms in the following way:

“When the soul examines on its own by itself, it goes off there to what is pure and always being and immortal and unvarying, and being related to this the soul comes to be always with it, whenever the soul comes to be on its own by itself and this is possible for it, and it stops its wandering and in relation to them is always unvaryingly constant, since it is grasping things of this sort. And isn’t this experience (πάθημα) of the soul called intelligence?” (79c-d)

In light of the Defense, we must read this passage as in fact describing an experience that in fact never or almost never occurs. This is not to question the reality of the relationship (συγγένεια) between the soul and the Forms. The soul on its own may well be particularly well suited to the cognition of the Forms, but embodiment impedes this cognition almost entirely. Notice Socrates’ above qualification that the soul grasps the Forms “whenever this is possible for it” (ὅτανπερ ἐξῇ αὐτῇ). This appears to be merely a notional possibility. “Intelligence” (φρόνησις) is an experience that the “genuine philosophers” doubt is possible in this life.

This position that I have sketched about the theory of Forms can be made clearer by briefly considering an important but controversial piece of evidence from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* about the development of the theory. Plato, Aristotle says:

...having first become familiar from youth with Cratylus and the opinions of the Heracliteans, to the effect that all the perceptible things are always flowing and that there is no knowledge about them, retained these views later. But Socrates, being concerned with ethical matters and not at all with nature as a whole, in the former domain searched for the universal (τὸ καθόλου ζητοῦντος) and was the first to fix his thought on definitions. Plato followed Socrates in this, but supposed that the problem had to do with other things, not perceptibles, for some such reason as this: it is impossible for there to be a common definition (κοινὸν ὅρον) of any of the perceptible things, as these are always changing. These other beings Plato called the ideas (ἐδέας), claiming that perceptible things were other than them (παρὰ ταῦτα) and all called after them. (987a32-b9)

Aristotle first claims that Plato accepted, thoughout his entire career, a metaphysical theory of flux derived (apparently indirectly) from Heraclitus. We have already seen that Plato’s
Socrates holds something like this theory in the Phaedo (78c-79a). Aristotle then supplies a characterization of the activity of Socrates that, though couched in non-Platonic terminology, matches how Plato presents him in the Meno (and certain other dialogues). Elsewhere in the Metaphysics, Aristotle makes clear that Socrates did not think of his definitional searches as involving any metaphysically “separate” object such as a Form (1078b30-31, 1086b3-5).

Plato, according to Aristotle, reasoned that there is no knowledge about perceptible things, on the grounds that [1] knowledge involves definitions of the sort sought by Socrates but [2] no definitions can be offered of ever-changing perceptual things. So if there is knowledge, it must concern some kind of entity that could be the object of a Socratic definitional search. Eligible entities of this sort Plato called Forms.

The argument that Aristotle attributes to Plato here is traditionally read as a modus ponens in something like the following way:

1. If there is knowledge, knowledge must be about some stable, non-perceptible things that exist.
2. There is knowledge.
3. Therefore, there exist some stable, non-perceptible things that are the objects of knowledge (i.e. the Forms).

Note, however, that Aristotle nowhere states [2], making only the vague remark that Plato thought that Socrates’ activity “had to do with other things” (περὶ ἑτέρων τοῦτο γιγνόμενον). His reluctance to attribute [2] to Plato is also clear in a closely related passage later in the Metaphysics where Aristotle says that those who first developed the theory of Forms did so because they accepted the view of the Heracliteans:

…that all the perceptible things are always flowing, with the result that since knowledge and intelligence will be of something (ὡστ’ εἶπερ ἐπιστήμη τινός ἔσται καὶ φρόνησις), there must be some other natures besides the perceptible ones and being stable (ἔτερας δὲ ἄλλα φύσεις εἶναι παρὰ τὰς αἰσθητὰς μενούσας), for there is no knowledge of things in flux. (1078b14-17)

This testimony of Aristotle’s regarding Plato can be used to support a skeptical reading of the dialogues, whereby Plato put forward the theory of Forms as a description of what
knowledge would have to be of, if we had it. Aristotle does not attribute to Plato any assertion that we do in fact have knowledge. Indeed, such an assertion from Plato would be surprising, considering the striking epistemic pessimism found in the *Phaedo*.

But what then is the point of Plato’s theory of Forms? One possible response, which I cannot fully develop here but which is continuous with the results of my analysis of the *Meno*, would be that trust in the existence of the Forms has pragmatic value for philosophers. In other words, the belief in entities that are suitable objects of knowledge keeps philosophers from getting discouraged about the search for knowledge and truth, even when these may be at most only dimly accessible for us in our present existence. To see whether this fully describes the role played by the Forms in Plato’s epistemology, however, we must now turn to the Recollection Argument later in the *Phaedo*.

### 5.3 Recollection and immortality in the *Phaedo* (72e-77a)

The theory of recollection is introduced just a little later in the *Phaedo*, after the first argument for the postmortem survival of the soul, the so-called Cyclical Argument (70c-72e). Cebes brings it up as a view commonly associated with Socrates:

“And according to that account too, Socrates, if it is true, which you are in the habit of often telling, that learning for us is in fact nothing else than recollection (ἡμῖν ἡ μάθησις οὐκ ἄλλο τι ἢ ἀνάμνησις τυγχάνει οὖσα), then according to that I guess it is necessary that we have learned in some prior time the things that we now recollect. But this is impossible, if our soul did not somehow exist before coming to be in this human form, so that in this way too the soul is likely (ἔοικεν) to be something immortal.” (72e-73a)

Cebes’ tentative concluding inference is in fact the first explicit mention of the immortality of the soul in the dialogue. That by recollection he means something like the idea from the *Meno* is confirmed by the explanation of recollection that he then provides. “When human beings are questioned, if someone questions them well, they say on their own how everything is,” he says. “But if knowledge and the correct account were not in fact in them, they would

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51The Cyclical Argument was not framed in these terms, but established rather that the living come from the dead and that the souls of the dead exist in Hades.
not be able to do that” (73a). Simmias asks to be “reminded” about the doctrine. In response Socrates offers the so-called Recollection Argument (73b-76e).

Socrates presents this argument, at least initially, as a defense of the claim that so-called learning is really recollection (73b), not that the soul is immortal. It is Cebes, not Socrates, who has drawn the connection between recollection and immortality. This connection will in fact turn out to be only partially true. As all parties agree at the conclusion of the argument, it establishes at most only prenatal, not postmortem existence (77b-c)—less, in fact, than the Cyclical Argument claimed to show. A further apparent limitation, which the characters do not remark on, is that it shows only that the soul existed for some time before birth, not that it did so permanently. The Recollection Argument is thus at best an incomplete response to Cebes’ initial doubt about whether “the soul of a dead human being exists and has some power and intelligence” (70b). And in all this I am granting to Socrates what he presents the argument as establishing: in fact, even the line of thought offered in favor of prenatal existence is, I will argue, unsuccessful.

These features of the Recollection Argument and its context in the Phaedo suggest that its real interest lies elsewhere than in the contribution it can make to proving the immortality of the soul. As in the Meno, recollection is motivated primarily by epistemological concerns, not by the aim to establish the soul’s postmortem survival. After the extremely pessimistic presentation of our epistemic situation in the Defense, whereby we can only gain pure knowledge by dying (if indeed our soul survives) or by adopting an unappealing and perhaps impossible asceticism, Socrates uses the theory of recollection as a psychological...
device to stave off discouragement about the enterprise of philosophy. In contrast to the
*Meno*, however, Socrates in the *Phaedo* seems to want to explain a broader portion of our
cognitive life than simply our ability to conduct dialectical investigations. Here recollection
is presented as a ubiquitous element in our experience of the sensible world, whereby the
Forms make an essential contribution to ordinary conceptual thought.\(^55\)

As with the *Meno*, we will need to distinguish different levels of cognitive achievement.
Opinion (δόξα) plays oddly no role in the Recollection Argument. Instead we will find
(confusingly) that a strong and a weak sense of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) are in play. The
weak sense of knowing involves having a kind of imagistic acquaintance, which Socrates also
refers to using the verb ἐννοεῖν, which I will translate as “to conceive.” This verb appears
frequently in the Recollection Argument, but its importance as a technical term has not
been appreciated, despite its later importance in Hellenistic epistemology. Knowledge in the
stronger sense, the putative aim of Socrates’ dialectical investigations, involves being able
to give a discursive account or definition. The purpose of the Recollection Argument is to
account for our ability to know things in the weaker sense, while maintaining that knowledge
in the stronger sense is not (currently) available to us.

Socrates begins the argument by offering a common-sense description of recollection, as
what happens when one thing reminds us of something else. Whenever this happens, we must
already have had knowledge of what we recollect—otherwise, we would be learning rather
than recollecting—but in the interim forgotten it (73c-e). Socrates then focuses on a special
kind of recollection, namely recollection from similar things or likenesses (ἀφ᾽ ὁμοίων), as
when a portrait reminds us of its subject (74a). In these cases, recollection involves noticing
whether or not the likeness “falls at all short in similarity” (τι ἐλλείπει...κατὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα)
from what it reminds us of.

\(^{55}\) I thus disagree with the view of Scott 1995 and others, whereby recollection in the *Phaedo* is intended
as an explanation strictly of higher learning for an elite group of philosophers, though I will in fact agree
with Scott on some important points. See Williams 2002 for a detailed critique of Scott, with the spirit of
which I am in agreement.
Socrates’ general strategy in what follows is to argue that perceptible things cause us to recollect Forms in just this way. Here is how he now introduces the notion of a Form, distinct from the perceptible things that share its name:

**SOCRATES:** See if this is right. We say, I suppose, that something is equal, I don’t mean a stick equal to a stick or a stone to a stone or anything like that, but something different beyond all these things, the equal on its own (αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον). Shall we say it is something, or nothing?

**SIMMIAS:** Let us say so, by Zeus, though it’s amazing.

**SOCRATES:** And do we know what it is?

**SIMMIAS:** Of course.

**SOCRATES:** Where did we get the knowledge of it? Wasn’t it from what we just said: seeing sticks or stones or other things that are equal, haven’t we conceived of that [Form] from them, being different from them? Doesn’t it seem to you to be different? Look at it this way. Don’t equal stones and sticks, being the same, sometimes appear equal to one but not to another?

**SIMMIAS:** Sure.

**SOCRATES:** Well, do the equals on their own ever appear unequal, or does equality (ἵσότης) appear to be inequality?

**SIMMIAS:** Never, Socrates.

**SOCRATES:** So they’re not the same thing, these equals and the equal on its own.

**SIMMIAS:** It doesn’t appear to me that they are at all, Socrates.

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56Simmias’s reply here (φῶμεν μέντοι νὴ Δία, θαυμαστῶς γε) very closely resembles his enthusiastic reply when the Forms were initially introduced at 65d (φαμὲν μέντοι νὴ Δία). But the differences are significant. Rowe 1993, 168 represents the common interpretation when he says that “Simmias now adds even more weight to his assent.” But this is precisely wrong! The subjunctive indicates a more tentative, hypothetical assertion, and the addition of θαυμαστῶς γε (note the limiting particle) indicates not confidence but perplexity. This shift is readily explained if we assume that Simmias has been affected by the pessimistic message of the Defense. His line of thought is: “Yes, by all means let us speak of abstract qualities in that way, although I now have to admit that it’s a strange that we do, since apparently they are beyond our ken in this life.”

57τῷ μὲν ἴσα φαίνεται…τῷ δ᾽οὔ: text, translation, and interpretation of these words are all vexed. I will not enter into this debate; see Rowe 1993, 169. This is often connected to the question of in what way sensible things “fall short” of the Forms; see Gallop 1975, 121-129 for discussion. Gallop terms “the usual interpretation” the view that a Form is realized only imperfectly and “approximately” in its sensible instances. The “usual interpretation” is attacked by Nehamas 1975, who argues that the equal things fall short of equality on its own merely by being equal only to some things but not to others, thus being only incidentally rather than essentially equal. This seems to be the most plausible interpretation of 74b6-c5, but there Socrates is arguing for the distinctness, not the superiority, of the equal on its own. Perhaps these two issues should not be conflated. Nehamas’s account is much less plausible as an account of the inferiority of the sensible world alleged by Socrates at 74d-e, mainly because Socrates continues to rely on the language of “likeness” (προσεοικέναι, 74e3). It seems difficult, on Nehamas’s reading, to say that equal things are likenesses of the equal on its own, but what exactly Socrates does have in mind is obscure.

58What is meant by the plural αὐτὰ τὰ ἴσα is much debated, but nothing hangs on it for me.
SOCRATES: But it’s nonetheless from these equals, being different from that equal, that we conceived of and got the knowledge of it?

SIMMIAS: What you say is very true. (74a-c)

One notable feature of this passage is the way that Socrates talks about knowledge (ἐπιστήμη). After Socrates introduces the notion of the “equal on its own,” Simmias agrees that “we know what it is” (ἐπιστάμεθα αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστιν). Some scholars (especially those who adopt the traditional view of the role of the Forms in the Phaedo as a familiar doctrine) take the first-person plural here to refer just to Socrates’ philosophical circle, who “know” the Form of equality in a strong sense. But this would be very surprising in light of the Defense, where Socrates held that pure knowledge of the Form is not possible in this life. Socrates has moreover been talking about knowledge of particular things like lyres or human beings (73d), which are not Forms. This suggests that he here is countenancing a popular, non-technical sense of “knowledge.” When he says that we know what the equal on its own is, he is merely making the plausible point that people in general have (somehow) at least a working acquaintance with the concept of equality.

In the question that Socrates then asks (and answers for) Simmias, he treats “getting the knowledge of” (λαβόντες τὴν ἐπιστήμην) as equivalent to having “conceived of” (ἐνενοήσαμεν) the equal upon seeing equal things (74b). This equivalence is reiterated when he speaks at the end of the quoted passage of how “we conceived of and got the knowledge of” (τὴν ἐπιστήμην ἐνενόηκάς τε καὶ εἴληφας) the Form. Having knowledge in the loose sense, I take it, is equivalent to having a “conception” (ἔννοια). Now Socrates has already said that recollection occurs when perceiving one thing causes us to “conceive of” (73c) something else (as, for instance, when perceiving a lyre causes us to conceive of its owner). The conception that results is something like a perception or mental image: describing how lovers are reminded of their beloved, Socrates says that they “saw they lyre and grasped in thought the form...”

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58 So Rowe 1993, 168 and Scott 1995, 56 ("Socrates focuses on the philosophical understanding of an entity very remote from most people’s thoughts, the form of equality").

60 Here I agree with Bostock 1986, 86 ("there must also be a more homely and humdrum knowledge of forms").
of the boy (ἐν τῇ διανοίᾳ ἔλαβον τὸ εἶδος τοῦ παιδός) who had the lyre” (73d). Here “form” (εἶδος) has the non-technical meaning of “visual appearance.”

On the one hand, then, Socrates is suggesting that we have a working knowledge of equality in the form of an imagistic conception. We get this from perceiving equal things. As Scott points out, it looks very much as if Socrates is proposing an empiricist account of conceptual formation. On the other hand, Socrates is also claiming that perceiving particular equal things causes us to recollect the equal on its own, which particular equal things fall short of. This indicates that we have prior knowledge of the equal on its own. He now attempts to argue on this basis that we in fact had our knowledge of the equal on its own prenatally (74e-75c). The argument is somewhat confusing and elliptical, so let me present it schematically:

1. We already knew (προειδέναι) the Form when we first conceived (ἐννοεῖν) that the equal things strive to be like it, but are in fact inferior (74e9-a3).
2. We did not conceive, nor is it possible to conceive, of the Form except from the senses (75a5-7).
3. Everything perceived by the senses strives to be like the Form, but is inferior (75b1-2).
4. We cannot have gotten knowledge of the Form from inferior likenesses.
5. We cannot have gotten knowledge of the Form from the senses. From [3] and [4].
6. We must have gotten knowledge (λαμβάνειν ἐπιστήμην) of the Form before we began to use the senses (75b4-6). From [1], [2], and [5].
7. We began to use the senses at birth (75b10-11).
8. We got knowledge of the equal on its own before birth (75c4-5). From [6] and [7].

The basic logic of the argument is this: since we could not have gotten knowledge of the Form through perception, we must have gotten knowledge of it before birth, when we were in a disembodied condition. This builds on the argument of the Defense, where Socrates

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61 Scott 1995, 58.
62 My reconstruction is similar to that of Bostock 1986, 101-102. According to Rowe 1993, 172-173, followed by Scott 1993, 61-64, Socrates instead relies on the idea that every perception that prompts us to recollect the Form also prompts us to compare the perceptible to the Form and notice its deficiency. Since any perception that makes us conceive of the Form thus also requires that we already knew it, no perception could have originally provided us with our conception of the Form. The problem with this reconstruction is that the assumption it pins on Socrates (that the cognitive events of being reminded and noticing the
claimed that we cannot attain knowledge in our current embodied state, in which we are
dependent on the senses. But, in contrast to the Defense, the current argument acknowledges
that we seem now to have some acquaintance with the Form (enough to refer to it in ordinary
thought and conversation).

The most surprising claim in the argument is [2], where Socrates says that “we have
not conceived of the equal on its own (ἀυτὸ ἐννενοηκέναι) nor is it possible to conceive of it
(μηδὲ δύνατον εἶναι ἐννοῆσαι) from anywhere else except from seeing or touching or some other
sense” (75a). Again, Socrates does speak of us “conceiving” of the Form, and this apparently
amounts to getting something like a mental image of it; apparently this conception must come
from the senses. Earlier, Socrates treated getting the conception as equivalent to getting the
knowledge of the Form (74b). But in [5] Socrates then denies that we can gain knowledge of
the Form through the senses. So if [2] is going to be true, Socrates must now be thinking of
knowledge and conceptions as distinct. We can get a conception on the basis of perceptible
instances, but this conception does not actually amount to knowledge in the strict or pure
sense. A new, stronger sense of “knowledge” is thus now in play in the argument.

Notice that [4] and [5], which are crucial on this reconstruction of the argument, are not
explicitly stated by Socrates. In [4] we have an important premise, namely that we cannot
get knowledge of the Form from a deficient likeness of it. Whereas in the Defense Socrates
impugned the senses themselves, he now also attacks the objects of the senses as sources of
knowledge. Now [4] might seem simply false. Surely one can learn about a paradigm from a
likeness of it, as one might learn about a historic building from a photograph. It seems clear,
though, that this kind of acquaintance is itself inferior. The photograph first of all gives a

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Frede 1999, 58 sees the relationship between the Defense and the Recollection Argument differently:
“Hatte Sokrates in seiner Verteidigungsrede den Eindruck erweckt, als sollten Philosophen sich von ihren
Sinnesindrücken ganz unabhängig machen, so wird dieses Bild klar modifiziert. Es erweist sich vielmehr,
daß die Sinne für das Lernen durch Wiedererinnerung unverzichtbar sind.” But it is not clear that philosophers
should be seeking to learn through recollection from sensible things at all, that this will in fact lead them to
the kind of knowledge they seek, or that this is their only mode of access to the Forms.

214
partial, reduced view; this deficiency is obvious even if we have never seen the original. More fundamentally, without knowledge of the paradigm, one cannot verify that the likeness really is a likeness of the paradigm at all. (Imagine a picture of the gardens of Sanssouci labeled as being of Versailles. A person who has seen neither could not diagnose the error.)

What of the argument as a proof that we had knowledge prenatally? Simply put, the temporal move in [6]-[8] seems unmotivated. Why could the required knowledge not be simply innate at birth? The conclusion that Socrates draws seems to covertly assume what he wants to prove, namely the preexistence of the soul. Nonetheless, Socrates now triumphantly expands on this conclusion:

“So if we got this knowledge before birth and had it when we were born, then we had knowledge (ἠπιστάμεθα) both before being born and right when we were born, not only of the equal but also of the larger and smaller and all such things? For our account is not about the equal any more than about the beautiful on its own (αὐτόι τοι καλοί) or the good on its own and just and pious and, as I claim, about all the things which we stamp with this, the ‘what it is,’ in asking questions and giving answers.” (75c-d)

Socrates here explicitly puts the Forms in a context of dialectical investigation (“in asking questions and giving answers”). The meaning of the phrase “which we stamp with this, the ‘what it is’” is somewhat obscure, and the text is also disputed. But we need not interpret it as a reference to successful dialectical searches that led to knowledge. Indeed, it is striking that Socrates does not here claim that we have knowledge of the Forms now, such as he does claim that we had before birth. What he seems to be interested in here, in other words, is merely the problem of inquiry. And here our past knowledge of the Forms suffices for us to be able to investigate them.

As in the *Meno*, Socrates generalizes from our awareness of non-moral, mathematical notions (i.e. what it is to be equal or greater or smaller) to moral ones like beauty, goodness, justice, and piety. (“The equal itself” will not appear again in the argument.) There is, however, an important point of disanalogy between the moral and non-moral cases. In a

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64 I translate the text found in latest Oxford edition: οἷς ἐπισφραγιζόμεθα τὸ ἔστι. The τὸ is omitted in the manuscript tradition, but Iamblichus has the phrase οἷς ἐπισφραγιζόμεθα τὸ ἔστι (Protrepticus 63, not in an explicit quotation). Burnet emended more radically to τὸ αὐτὸ ἔστι.
sense, we have seen instances of perfect equality (for instance, two stacks containing equal numbers of books). There are also ways in which the two stacks do not exemplify perfect equality, since they are equal only to each other and in a certain respect; nonetheless we can isolate a particular relation that embodies equality in an unqualified way. By contrast, we have never seen something that is perfectly beautiful, even in just one respect. In the case of non-moral terms like equality, we could perhaps generalize from our perceptions to form a conception of perfect equality. For beauty or goodness, we have no unqualified instances to start from.

At this point, Socrates and Simmias have agreed that we had knowledge prenatally (or, at any rate, at birth). The proof that so-called learning is recollection, however, is still incomplete: it has not been shown that the prenatal knowledge has been lost and needs to be recovered. Socrates accordingly now offers Simmias a choice between two accounts. On the first, we already have the knowledge when we are born and retain it throughout our lives, so that we always are in a state of knowing (75d). On the second, we acquired the knowledge before birth, lost it at birth, then gradually recover it through sense perception, such that what we call learning would actually be recollection, the recovery of our own knowledge (75e).

Interestingly, Simmias confesses himself unable to choose between these two options (76b). This uncertainty shows that he must be thinking of knowledge in a loose, ordinary sense; if he was thinking of advanced philosophical knowledge, the first option could be quickly eliminated. Socrates helps Simmias to decide by explicitly introducing a more stringent criterion for knowledge: he gets Simmias to agree that it is necessary that a man with knowledge can give an account (δοῦναι λόγον) about the things he knows (76b). Knowledge on this view is characterized not by an imagistic acquaintance (as in the case of a conception) but by discursive explanation. Once this standard is accepted, the decision about whether prenatal knowledge is retained becomes simple:
Socrates: Well, does it seem to you that everyone (πάντες) is able to give an account about the things we were just speaking of?

Simmias: I wish! But in fact I rather fear lest tomorrow at this time there is no longer any human such as can do this in a fitting way (ἀξίως οἷός τε τοῦτο ποιῆσαι).

Socrates: So not everyone (πάντες) seems to you to know (ἐπίστασθαι γε) these things?

Simmias: Not at all.

Socrates: So they are recollecting what they once learned?

Simmias: Necessarily. (76b-c)

Scholars who wish to read Simmias’s earlier agreement that “we know” what the equal is (74b) in a strong sense, as referring to a special kind of philosophical understanding shared only by Socrates’ inner circle, see in this later passage support for their view. On their reading, no change in meaning for the verb ἐπίστασθαι is required between the two passages.

A fundamental problem for this view, however, is the absence of any suggestion here that an elite group of philosophers can actually give an account of the Forms and thus qualify as having knowledge. Rather, Simmias suggests that only Socrates is even of the sort to be able to do this. We should read this as an admiring compliment to Socrates’ dialectical expertise, not as a claim that Socrates actually can or does offer such accounts. The plain sense of the passage is that no one is able to give an account of moral terms, at least, and thus know them in the strict sense. Simmias’s shift from confidence (at 74b) to pessimism here is confirmation that the meaning of “knowledge” has shifted.

That people recollect (in the ordinary use of conceptions) has now supposedly been established. At this point Socrates offers his final, formal inference in favor of the soul’s prenatal existence—and Simmias puts up some new resistance:

Socrates: Therefore, Simmias, souls existed earlier, before they were in human form, apart from bodies, and had intelligence (φρόνησιν).

65 Cf. Scott 1995, 67-68. Recall that for Scott, recollection is the prerogative of only a philosophical elite, not ordinary people. On his view, the verb “recollect” implies the actual attainment of knowledge; on my view it does not (compare the case of the slave in the Meno, who recollects only true opinions). It is thus a double problem for this view that here at 76c4 Socrates claims that people in general are engaging in recollection, but fall short of having knowledge. Scott does not discuss the line (his quotation of the passage is conveniently truncated), but he would have to claim that there is an unsignalled change of subject to “philosophers” is required for the verb ἀναμιμνῄσκονται. It is surely more plausible that the subject remains πάντες throughout.
Simmias: Unless, Socrates, we get these pieces of knowledge as we are being born. That time is still left.

Socrates: Let’s grant that, comrade—then in what other time do we lose them? For we aren’t born having them, as we just agreed. Or do we lose them at the same time as we get them? Can you suggest some other time?

Simmias: No, Socrates, I didn’t realize that I wasn’t making sense. (76c-d)

Although prenatal knowledge (and thus by implication prenatal existence) was supposedly already established at 75c, Plato now puts it in double jeopardy, bringing it back before us in order to allow Simmias (who apparently, and quite understandably, does not remember or was not persuaded by the earlier argument) to pose an objection.

Simmias’s objection amounts to proposing the alternative possibility of the knowledge being merely innate, rather than prenatal. Socrates replies that we cannot get and lose the knowledge at the same time. In fact Socrates has been rather inconsistent on just this point. Here at 76d2-3 he refers to an earlier agreement that we do not have knowledge when we are born (οὐ γὰρ δὴ ἔχοντές γε αὐτὰς γεγνόμεθα, ὡς ἄρτι ὡμολογήσαμεν), evidently referring to 75e2-3 (λαβόντες πρὶν γενέσθαι γεγνόμενοι ἀπωλέσαμεν). But in his earlier assertion quoted above he stressed precisely that we do have the knowledge at birth (λαβόντες αὐτὴν πρὸ τοῦ γενέσθαι ἐγενόμεθα, ἠπιστάμεθα καὶ πρὶν γενέσθαι καὶ εὐθὺς γενόμενοι, 75c7-9). In any case the language of “getting” knowledge at some initial point imports an undefended assumption: Socrates ignores the possibility that we could be born with latent knowledge or with a disposition to form it.

66Such an alternative, innatist picture might be suggested passages in the Republic and the Timaeus, where recollection and prenatal existence are not mentioned. In the seventh book of the Republic, Socrates criticizes those who think education (παδεία) involves “putting knowledge in the soul that isn’t in it (ἐνούσης), like giving sight to the blind with eyes” (518b-d). Education instead involves turning a power of sight that is already possessed in the right direction. In the Timaeus, the revolutions of the circles of our immortal soul, originally in tune with those of the cosmic soul, are thrown out of whack by embodiment and must be restored to the original condition through the right kind of care and education (44a-c). It is true that Timaeus does not speak about particular pieces of knowledge in our soul that are obscured at the moment of birth; his account, moreover, if taken literally, does require the soul’s prenatal existence. Nonetheless these passages both suggest that Plato could conceive of a disposition to rationality inherent in the very structure of the soul but misapplied or corrupted (not irreparably) by the trauma of embodiment and social life. Possibly Plato resists the innatist picture precisely because he sees birth as the traumatic beginning of the cognitive impairment associated with embodiment; it would be paradoxical for the soul to actually acquire knowledge at this point.
Socrates now sums up the results of the Recollection Argument, connecting the theory of recollection with the theory of Forms:

“So is this our situation, then, Simmias? If the things we’re always babbling about exist, something beautiful (καλόν τι) and good and all such being (οὐσία), and we refer everything from the senses to this, discovering that it is already our own beforehand, and we compare (ἀπεικάζομεν) these things to that, then it is necessary, just as these things are the case (οὕτως οὐσία καὶ ταῦτα ἔστιν), that our soul also exists even before we are born. If these things are not the case (εἰ δὲ μὴ ἔστι ταῦτα), then we would have put forward this argument in vain. So is it like this, that there is an equal necessity that these things are the case and that our souls exist before we are born (ταῦτα τε εἶναι καὶ τὰς ἡμετέρας ψυχὰς πρὶν καὶ ἡμᾶς γεγονόναι), and if these things are not the case, neither are these?” (76d-e)

Socrates here coyly avoids actually asserting either the existence of the Forms or the prenatal existence of the soul. By an “equal necessity” he seems to mean that, within the logic of the Recollection Argument, the two theses stand or fall together.

Now the dependence of the argument for the prenatal existence of the soul on the Forms is clear. (If there are no Forms, then there would be nothing for the soul to get acquainted with before birth.) The alleged dependence in the other direction does not seem to have been established. What if the Forms existed, but the soul did not exist before our birth? This would suggest either that we have an innate acquaintance of the Forms, or that we come to know them to some degree and in some way, during this life, or that the Forms exist but are simply unknown and inaccessible to us during this life. The last option is in fact broadly the picture found in the Defense, whereby the Forms are imperceptible, but in some way the object of philosophical inquiry. There the ontological status of the Forms is

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67 My translation of this paragraph differs from most renderings. The phrase ταῦτα ἔστι in 76e3, which I render as “these things are the case,” is usually interpreted as referring to the existence of the Forms (e.g. Gallop’s “those objects exist”). This translation is harsh, however, given that Socrates has twice in the preceding lines contrasted a feminine singular pronoun, agreeing with οὐσία, with a neuter plural, referring to sensible things (ἐπὶ ταῦτα τὰ ἐκ τῶν αἰσθήσεων πάντα ἀναφέρομεν, 76d9; ταῦτα ἐκείνη ἀπεικάζομεν, 76e2). It would be rather confusing for a neuter plural pronoun to now refer to the Forms. The veridical sense of εἶναι that I adopt is in any case required in the final words of what Socrates says: εἰ μὴ ταῦτα, οὐδὲ τάδε; (76e7), where τάδε must refer to the existence of the soul prior to birth. The one difficulty comes at 76e5-7, where εἶναι must be taken ἀπὸ κοινοῦ with both ταῦτα (in the veridical sense) and τὰς ἡμετέρας ψυχὰς (in the existential sense).

68 So Gallop 1975, 135.

69 So Frede 1999, 61, who rightly observes that “wenn die Ideen ewige Wesenheiten sind, bestehen sie unabhängig davon, ob sie erkannt werden oder nicht.”
left open, but in the Affinity Argument Socrates will soon speak about them as if they are independent substances. This is foreshadowed by how Simmias now enthusiastically agrees with what Socrates has said:

“It’s extraordinary, Socrates. The necessity seems to me to be the same, and it’s a fine thing how the account has resorted to putting on the same footing the existence of the soul before we are born and the being that you’re now talking about. There is nothing so clear to me as that, that all such things exist as much as possible, ‘good’ and ‘beautiful’ and all the others which you were just speaking of, and it seems to me sufficiently proved.” (76e-77a)

Despite the fact that the theory of Forms may be in some sense a new idea to Simmias, as is suggested by the locution “the being that you’re now talking about” (τὴν οὐσίαν ἣν σὺ νῦν λέγεις), he appears to be much more confident about it than about the immortality of the soul. He is particularly emphatic that the Forms have a real and separate existence (εἶναι ὡς οἷόν τε μάλιστα), and it seems to be this, rather than the prenatal existence of the soul, that he thinks has been “sufficiently proved” (ἰκανῶς ἀποδεδεικται).

That the Forms exist as independent and separate entities, which Simmias takes to be the major upshot of the Recollection Argument, cuts both ways with respect to their knowability. On the one hand, on this view the Forms exist and can, in principle, be known; inquiry about them is not fundamentally quixotic from the start. On the other hand, the Forms are not concepts originating in our minds, which we can learn about through analysis. They are independent entities outside of us, and as a matter of contingent fact we may be ill-equipped to actually make any discovery about them with our current perceptual equipment. Consider the case of a distant planet: we might know that it exists and have a name for it, to which we might attach all sorts of beliefs, yet still lack any way of gaining knowledge about it.

70 Cf. Phaedo 92a, where Simmias and Cebe both express firm support for the theory of recollection even though both have openly doubted the immortality of the soul. They admit, when pressed by Socrates, that they are thus contradicting themselves, but the clear implication is that what convinces them is the notion that the soul’s learning requires contact with the Forms, not the further view that this contact occurred during the soul’s prenatal existence.

71 Cf. Dimas 2003, 176-177n3.

72 Brooke Holmes points out to me that something like this very example is used in the introduction to the Hippocratic treatise De vetere medicina, where the author rejects the use of a “hypothesis” (ὑπόθεσις) in medicine, in contrast to “unclear and puzzling matters (tà ἄφαντα τε καὶ ἀπορεόμενα), concerning which it is
This epistemic pessimism that emerges from a combined consideration of Socrates’ Defense and the Recollection Argument is qualified, however, by Socrates’ claim that perception of equal things leads to us having a “conception” (ἔννοια). These conceptions play a role similar to that of what I termed “concepts” in my discussion of the Meno: they underlie our use of language and allow us to get started in a dialectical search. Conceptions in the Phaedo are similar, though they are presented as imagistic rather than discursive. Neither concepts nor conceptions yield discursive definitions of the kind that Socrates prizes. Nonetheless, it seems that they somehow correspond to Forms—but the nature of this correspondence, and how we can be sure that it is reliable, is left open.

My talk of concepts and conceptions is intended to suggest how Plato’s discussions of recollection anticipates the role played by two closely related terms in Hellenistic epistemology: namely “conception” (ἔννοια) and “preconception” (πρόληψις). The precise sense of necessary, if one attempts to say anything, to use a hypothesis, as for instance about the things in the sky (τὰ μετέωρα) and under the earth. If someone should speak about these and know how they are, it would be clear (δῆλα) neither to the one speaking nor to those listening whether these things are true or not, since there is nothing one could refer them to in order to know clearly” (1.3). Here the author seems to recognize both the problem of inquiry (which does not apply to medicine, but which can be solved through the use of a ὑπόθεσις) and the problem of discovery (which he views as insurmountable—there is no way to know when we have found out the truth about certain natural phenomena). The similarities (and dissimilarities) to Plato’s advocacy of a “hypothetical method” in both the Meno and the Phaedo are intriguing, but it is beyond my scope to examine them here.

Scott 1995, 58, 68-69 is thus right when he claims that Socrates provides an empiricist account of concept formation, concepts which are indirectly linked to Forms (in virtue of the fact that the perceptible world is itself modeled on the Forms) but which do not lead to knowledge of them. Scott is too optimistic, however, in thinking that recollection allows philosophers to know the Form. The experience of everyday perception can at most prompt us to think that there are Forms; it cannot get us to knowledge of them. Notice a point of translation in Socrates’ remark at 75b: “So before we began to see and hear and use the other senses we must have somehow gotten knowledge of the equal on its own, that it exists (εἰληφότας ἐπιστήμην αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἰσου ὅτι ἔστιν), if we were going to refer to it (ἐκεῖσε ἀνοίσειν) the equals from the senses.” Hackforth and Grube seem to omit the words ὅτι ἔστιν in their translations. Gallop 1975, 229 claims that it “must refer to the nature, not the existence, of the equal,” but does not substantiate this claim. But on my view the more natural translation makes perfect sense: the formation of our conceptions alerts us to (or at any rate might make us believe in) the existence of the Form, but it does not give us substantive acquaintance with them. Cf. Republic 505d-e, where Socrates says of the idea of the good that every soul “divines it to be something (ἀπομαντευομένη τι εἶναι), but is at a loss and cannot sufficiently grasp what it is (τί ποτ᾽ ἐστίν) or have stable trust (πίστει μονίμῳ) about it as with other things.”

The evidence is too complicated to discuss here, but in general the Hellenistic schools regard the πρόληψις as a special kind of ἔννοια. Cf. e.g. Diogenes Laertius X.33-34 for the Epicurean view (τὴν δὲ πρόληψιν λέγουσιν ὅσεις κατάληψιν ἢ δόξην ἢ ἔννοιαν ἢ καθολικὴν νόημα ἐναποκειμένην, τουτέστατα μνήμην τοῦ πολλάκις ἔξωθεν φανέντος, οἷον τὸ Τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν ἄνθρωπος) and VII.54 for the Stoic (ἔστι ἡ πρόληψις ἔννοια
these terms varies, but in general they refer to a primitive conceptual awareness underlying ordinary cognitive and linguistic ability. The noun πρόληψις does not occur before Epicurus (Plato does not even use the associated verb), but ἔννοια is found in Plato frequently, including once in the Recollection Argument (73c9), where the verb ἐννοεῖν is also, as we have seen, very common. Sextus Empiricus reports a view whereby conceptions and preconceptions (apparently he is using the terms synonymously) answer the problems of inquiry and discovery, formulated in terms that clearly recall Meno’s challenge:

...it is agreed that a preconception and a conception (πρόληψις καὶ ἔννοια) must precede everything that is searched for (παντὸς τοῦ ζητουμένου). For how could anyone even search having no conception (ἔννοια) of the thing that is searched for? Nor, if he happens upon it, will he know that he happened upon it, nor if he misses it, that he missed it. (Against the Mathematicians VIII.331a-332a)

According to Sextus, the Pyrrhonian skeptic does not lack a (pre)conception, and is thus able to search. The skeptic’s problem is that she feels that she has in fact many conceptions of a thing and is unable to judge between them. This experience suggests that, however it is that we acquire our conceptions, they are not reliably linked to reality.

An interesting connection between Plato’s theory of recollection and Hellenistic “conceptions” is made in the first book of Cicero’s Tusculan Disputations. In the course of various arguments for the immortality of the soul, in service of the broader view that death is not a bad thing, Cicero gives a brief summary of the Platonic doctrine that the soul has “recollection of a prior life” (recordatio vitae superioris). He first summarizes the episode from the Meno in which “Socrates questions some little boy about geometry, concerning the dimensions of a square” in order to show that “learning is nothing other than recollection” (I.57). But, Cicero continues, Socrates discusses recollection “much more precisely (multo

76 Plato uses the term ἔννοια at Republic 524e and Timaeus 47a-b in connection with the idea of searching; these texts could have been influential in the development of the Hellenistic idea.

77 Fine 2014 explores in great detail the reception of Meno’s challenge in post-Platonic ancient philosophy; the volume appeared too late for me to take account of it here.
accuratius) in that conversation that he held on the day when he left this life,” i.e. in the *Phaedo*:

He teaches that anyone, though they may seem to be in all respects uneducated, by responding to one who asks questions well, shows that they are not then learning these things, but recalling by remembering (*reminiscendo recognoscere*), and that it could in no way happen that from when we were boys we had conceptions (*notiones*), which they call ἔννοιαι, of so many and such great things implanted in and as it were stamped on our souls, unless the soul (*animus*) had the power of knowing things before it came into a body. Since nothing exists, as Plato everywhere claims—I mean he thinks nothing exists that comes to be and perishes, but only that which always is such as it is (he calls it an ἰδέα, but we call it a *species*)—the soul could not recognize these things once shut up in a body, and so must bring them with it as already known. So it’s no surprise that the soul knows so many things. For while it no longer sees these things [i.e. the Forms] when it has suddenly entered such an unaccustomed and troubled dwelling, when it gathers itself together and restores itself, then it recognizes these things through memory. Thus learning is nothing other than recollection. (I.57-58)

Despite his praise for the greater precision of the discussion found in the *Phaedo*, Cicero’s summary of the discussion is not very precise. He claims first that the soul’s prenatal existence is suggested by the fact that we have from childhood certain “conceptions” (*notiones*), then goes on to explain that we could not have acquired these conceptions while embodied because they are of the Forms, which the embodied soul cannot directly access.

Cicero tells us that “they call” (*vocant*) such conceptions ἔννοιαι. But Cicero’s description of these conceptions “as implanted in and as it were stamped on our souls” (*insitas et quasi consignatas*) in fact suggests, against the drift of his summary of Plato, an innatist picture. It therefore seems likely that the “they” Cicero refers to are in fact the Stoics. Now whether the Stoic ἔννοιαι are in some sense innate or rather acquired through experience is debated, but clearly the Stoics did not hold that we have them prenatally. Cicero’s text may suggest a degree of syncretism between Stoicism and the Platonic theory of recollection in this period. It may also be evidence that the early Stoics developed their theory on the basis of reflection on the *Phaedo*.³⁸

³⁹As Dyson 2009, xx-xxi suggests.
⁸⁰Another Stoicizing term that Cicero uses is *consignatus*, which appears, as Sandbach 1930, 49 suggests, to translate something like ἐναπεσφραγίσμενος (used at Diogenes Laertius VII.46, 50 to describe the φαντασία
5.4 Recollection in the *Phaedrus* (247c-252b)

We can conclude this study of recollection and immortality in Plato with a brief glance at the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates appeals to recollection for quite a different reason, namely to explain the experience of erotic love. His remarks about the theory here are less detailed (and more poetic) than those in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, and they are not directly connected to the proof of the soul’s immortality (cf. § 3.3). My aim in this section is thus merely to show that what is said about recollection in the *Phaedrus* supports the interpretation developed so far in the chapter, whereby recollection does not involve our recovering clear or pure knowledge of the Forms.

The *Phaedrus* does feature Socrates’s most detailed description of how souls first come to know the Forms. Like the brief and allusive account in the *Meno* (there is none in the *Phaedo*), that of the *Phaedrus* is purely mythological. The disembodied soul beholds “the colorless, shapeless, intangible being that really is”—that is, the Forms, for instance, Justice, Temperance, and Knowledge—in the “place beyond the heaven” (247c-e). Socrates emphasizes that the Forms are accessible only to the mind, but he nonetheless describes the encounter (as in the *Meno*) using the metaphorical terminology of sight.

When souls fall from their disembodied condition into an embodied one, they forget about the Forms that they earlier saw. When they then encounter in the perceptible world “likenesses” (ὁμοιώματα) of the Forms, the souls able to recollect the originals “are astounded and can no longer control themselves, but because they do not have a sufficiently full perception (διὰ τὸ μὴ ἱκανῶς διαισθάνεσθαι) they are ignorant (ἀγνοοῦσι) of what their experience is” (250a-b). This is in line with the *Phaedo*: recollection is provoked by instances of ordinary καταληπτική. The Latin verb *consignare* means to “affix with a seal,” i.e. with a σφραγίς, in order to guarantee it as genuine. Now the Greek verb ἐπισφραγίζεσθαι is in fact also found in the Recollection Argument (75d2), where it means apparently to somehow “certify” the result of a dialectical investigation as the essence of a thing. Cf. similar “dialectical” uses at *Statesman* 258c (δεῖ γὰρ [τὴν πολιτικὴν] ἀνευρεῖν, καὶ χωρὶς ἀφελόντας από τῶν ἄλλων ἰδέαν αὐτὴ μίαν ἐπισφραγίσασθαι) and *Philebus* 26c-d (καὶ τὸ ἄπειρον παρέσχετο γένη, ὡς δ᾿ ἐπισφραγισθέντα τῷ τοῦ μᾶλλον καὶ ἐναντίον γένει ἐν ἐφάνη). It is thus interesting that Cicero in this passage twice uses Stoic terminology that also appears in the passage under discussion in Plato, but in a quite different sense.
perception, yet is not a fully conscious experience yielding knowledge. Even for those best
able to recollect, the experience involves confusion and uncertainty.

The difficulty is due to the inferior quality of both the likenesses themselves and our
sensory organs. “There is no radiance at all in the likenesses here of Justice and Temperance
and the other things valuable for the soul,” Socrates says, “so only a few people barely
observe in images, using dim instruments, the kind that was the model” (250b). Beauty,
however, is an exceptional case. While the other Forms are not visible at all, beauty has the
special status of being “most manifest (ἐκφανέστατον) and most lovable” in its perceptual
instances (250c-e). The dramatic experience of erotic love occurs when a lovers recollects
his previous encounter with beauty from the sight of his beloved (251a-252b).

So who ends up recollecting? Socrates emphasizes that every soul that comes to be incar-
nated in a human body must have once seen the Forms. “A human being,” he says, “must
understand something said according to the Form, which goes from many sense-perceptions
to one thing grasped together by reasoning. This is recollection (ἀνάμνησις) of the things
that our soul once saw” (249b-c). Being a human being, in other words, requires an abil-
ity to use concepts to categorize different perceptions, and these concepts are derived from
our prior acquaintance with the Forms. A previous sight of the Forms is thus presented as
underlying human cognitive and linguistic abilities in general (not just for philosophers). In
other words, myth is used to guarantee that our conceptions are true and reliable (a problem
left open in the Phaedo).

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81 Notice the reappearance of the term “recollection” in a comic context later in the Palinode (254d).
82 The Greek for the key sentence is admittedly very difficult and possibly corrupt: δεῖ γὰρ ἄνθρωπον
συνέναι κατ’ εἶδος λεγόμενον, ἐκ πολλῶν ἰὸν αἰσθήσεων εἰς ἑν λογισμῷ συναρµοφένον. Scott 1993, 78-79 argues
that the sentence instead attributes to all human beings only the duty to engage in higher-level philosophical
thought. He suggests that the word λογισμός implies a “deliberate, perhaps laborious activity”—but Plato
does after all refer to the highest part of the normal human soul as the λογιστικόν, implying that λογισμός
is something that all ordinary human beings engage in constantly. Scott further argues that the line implies
“a movement away from the many sense perceptions to the form” that sounds more like philosophical than
ordinary thought. But this misconstrues what Socrates is saying, which is that humans must be able to
understand language (συνέναι...λεγόμενον) that goes “from the many perceptions to one thing” in the sense
of categorizing things “according to the Form.”
On the other hand, Socrates also says that it is “not easy” for every soul to recollect on the basis of perceptible things here, depending on how good a view they had of the Forms and how well they behave in this life (250a). For this reason, “only the thought of the philosopher really takes wing” (249c). It seems to me that the best way to make sense of this is to suppose that recollection is not an all-or-nothing affair, but rather refers to a spectrum of experiences. Now, there is still no reason to think that Plato holds that conscious, high-level recollection from perceptibles occurs only for philosophers: his purpose is to give an explanation of erotic love, an experience hardly restricted to an intellectual elite. Philosophers are merely better in touch with their previous vision; since they retain a more vivid memory of it, their recollection is on a more conscious level. Yet even philosophers are never said to actually recover clear knowledge of the Forms.

Socrates’ remarks in the Phaedrus are, again, mythological in character. The particular dimension of the theory of recollection that is always explicitly mythical is that dealing with how we initially encountered the Forms, thereby gaining whatever dim knowledge of them we retain. This use of myth can be compared with that discussed in the previous chapter, where I presented myth as a vehicle for communicating a false but socially salutary doctrine of rewards and punishments in the afterlife to non-philosophers. With regard to the theory of recollection, myth similarly provides a psychological incentive, not for moral action but for philosophical investigation. The mythical dimension of recollection appears, however, to be directed largely towards philosophers, although it seems an open question whether (all) philosophers (always) require such mythical incentives. At any rate, the mythological portrayal of the disembodied soul’s encounter with the Forms should be seen as serving, not refuting, a skeptical perspective. It explains our longing for knowledge and our ability to search for it—not our ability to attain it.

Scott 1995, 74 insists that in the Phaedrus recollection must explain only rare instances of higher learning, since Plato presents it as “an experience that feels extraordinary to the person who has it.” Scott seems oddly resistant to viewing sexual attraction as a common phenomenon.
The previous chapters presented a revisionary interpretation of Plato’s doctrine of psychic immortality, whereby it does not involve a commitment to the permanent postmortem survival of the individual soul. This interpretation might seem to be in tension with an obvious and central feature of Plato’s texts, one that was moreover decisive for the later tradition—namely, that Plato’s Socrates offers arguments for the immortality of the soul, apparently understood in a literal sense. On my reading, we must take these arguments at less than face value. Many readers have of course found these arguments to be flawed, but this merely makes matters more puzzling. Why does Plato put forward bad arguments (as opposed to, say, merely myths) for a view he does not in fact really take seriously? What is the status of these arguments, and are they not seriously misleading, not merely for non-philosophers, but for philosophical readers too? Considering these questions will help us to understand not only Plato’s doctrine of the immortality of the soul, but his attitude to philosophy as a whole.

It is a commonplace that many ancient philosophers saw their arguments as having therapeutic value, as “cures” for various non-rational beliefs and emotions. The philosophical therapist sees her arguments as valuable not only as a means to reach truth, but also for the benefit that they can convey. In particular, such arguments were used in the ancient world as a therapy against the fear of death, an emotion that ancient philosophers of various  

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1 On ancient philosophy as therapy, see Nussbaum [1994]. The classic statement of this view is a sententia attributed to Epicurus (quoted without attribution by Porphyry, *Ad Marcellum* 31): “Empty is the logos of that philosopher if it cares for no human suffering (μηδὲν πάθος ἀνθρώπου θεραπεύεται). Just as there is no benefit from medicine if it does not care for the sicknesses of the body, neither is there any from philosophy, if it does not expel the suffering of the soul.”
different schools viewed as especially ethically problematic. Many of Plato’s “proofs” of the immortality of the soul serve this purpose, as is especially clear in the *Phaedo*.

Obviously a therapeutic argument can be beneficial and also sound, establishing a true conclusion. Nonetheless, these two reasons for valuing an argument can also come apart. There is thus an important relationship between philosophical therapy and skepticism. If, as the philosophical therapist holds, arguments possess value for a reason unrelated to whether they reveal or establish the truth, this provides a motivation to engage in philosophy even if one does not think or is not sure that arguments can grasp the truth. In this chapter I will argue that something like this is Plato’s view: he holds that arguments can have therapeutic value even when they are not logically probative.

This is not to say that Plato is in these cases simply being deceptive: it is rather that he is skeptical about the possibility of proof to begin with. In contrast to Aristotle, Plato never develops a discipline devoted to analyzing argumentative validity; indeed he has no real technical terminology for arguments at all, often speaking simply of *logoi*. His playfully confusing deployment of the terms *muthos* and *logos* (cf. Chapter 4) suggests that he does not assume a fundamental distinction between argument and myth. By this I do not mean to claim that Plato does not recognize any special force in deductive arguments; clearly he does. But in my view he sees this force as residing in their power to persuade rather than to attain truth. It is this persuasive power that gives arguments their therapeutic value. Plato’s position might be called “therapeutic skepticism.” These are all large claims, which must be rendered plausible by what follows.

The chapter has five sections. I begin, in the first, with an overview of what Socrates says about the fear of death, in both the *Apology* and the *Phaedo*. I then turn, for the rest of the chapter, to a neglected but extremely important passage later in the *Phaedo*, in which Socrates warns his listeners, discouraged by the objections of Simmias and Cebes, against becoming “misologists” (88c-91c). This interlude is in fact Plato’s most detailed thematic reflection on philosophical argumentation, as well as one of the earliest sustained
engagements with skeptical ideas in ancient philosophical texts. It is obviously significant that Plato embeds such a discussion in a dialogue primarily devoted to arguments for the immortality of the soul. The chapter’s second section deals with the meaning of “trust” (πίστις), a concept of great importance both in the *Phaedo* and elsewhere in ancient Greek philosophy. In the third section, I show how “trust” as a cognitive attitude plays a crucial role in Socrates’ explanation of misology through a comparison with misanthropy (89d-90d). The fourth section examines Socrates’ subsequent exhortation to his listeners, in which he makes the striking admission that he is acting “unphilosophically” in trying to persuade himself of the soul’s immortality (90d-91c). Here I argue that Socrates is making a serious pragmatic argument for trust in the immortality of the soul, and that this motivates his real criticism of the misologists: they do not recognize or take advantage of the therapeutic power of *logos* to create trust. In the fifth and final section, I situate both Socrates and the misologists within a range of ancient proto-skeptical and skeptical positions, suggesting, in a speculative spirit, that the warning against misology was a passage that later Academics and Pyrrhonians both took notice of.

### 6.1 Socrates on the fear of death in the *Apology* and the *Phaedo*

The fear of death was viewed as ethically problematic by all ancient philosophers, though not always for the same reasons. The Roman Epicurean Lucretius, in his poem *De rerum natura*, makes the fear of death the root of all evil among human beings:

> Avarice, too, and the blind lust for honors, which forces wretched humans to transgress the limits of law, and as the sometimes allies and servants of crime to struggle day and night with incredible toil to rise up to the greatest riches—these wounds of life are nurtured in no small degree by the fear of death. (III.59-64)

Here unrestrained worldly ambition is traced back, in a strikingly modern piece of psychologizing, to the fear of death (*mortis formido*). In a somewhat similar vein, Socrates in  

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*Cf.* LaBarge [2012] for further discussion of this topic.
the Republic suggests that fear of death leads to cowardice in warfare (382a-b). These are pragmatic concerns: the fear of death is linked to morally problematic kinds of behavior.

A different objection to the fear of death is epistemic rather than pragmatic. Ancient philosophers generally analyzed fear as involving the expectation of something bad, such that the fear of death crucially involves the view that death is a bad thing. Epicureans like Lucretius, for instance, argued that death, as the end of all sensation, is really “nothing to us,” such that the fear of death is founded on a notion that is simply false. This also provides an opening for therapeutic argument to intervene: by exposing the mistake on which the fear of death rests, philosophy can mitigate or extinguish the fear.

In the Apology, Socrates offers a complex and subtle account of why this fear should be avoided that incorporates both sorts of objection. He first appeals to a pragmatic consideration based on moral consequences, in the course of his discussion of why he pursues his allegedly god-given mission of philosophizing even when it may cost him his life. “Wherever someone has stationed himself, thinking it best, or has been stationed by a ruler,” Socrates says, “there he must, as it seems to me, remain and risk danger, taking into account neither death nor anything else besides what is base” (28d). The idea implied here, which in fact underlies the entire speech, is that death must not be feared because this attitude might lead us to care more about self-preservation than about other commitments. Socrates leaves it quite open what these other commitments may be: the risk is that fear of death will overwhelm any other concern, in effect creating one overriding dogmatic commitment that will render philosophical examination about how to live otiose.

3Cf. the definitions of fear in the pseudo-Platonic Definitions (φόβος is the ἐκπληξις ψυχῆς ἐπὶ κακοῦ προσδοκίας) and Cicero, Tusculan Disputations V.52 (est enim metus futurae aegritudinis sollicita exspectatio).

4The connection between avoiding the fear of death and engaging in open-ended examination about how to live is made especially clear at Gorgias 512d-e (Socrates is speaking to Callicles): “You blessed man, look if what is noble and good isn’t something else than saving and being safe. See if a real man (τὸν γε ὃς ἀληθῶς ἄνδρα) should not forget about living as long as possible (τὸ ζῆν ὁποσοδὴ χρόνον) and not be a lover of life (οὐ φιλοψυχητέον); rather, he should leave all this to the god and trust in what the women say, that no one can flee fate, and after this he should examine in what way he will live for whatever time he will live in the best possible way (σκεπτέον τίν’ ἀν τρόπον τούτου ἄν μέλλοι χρόνων βιῶναι ὡς ἀριστα βοή).”
But Socrates also offers a second, more fundamental reason to avoid fearing death—namely, that such a fear is epistemically irresponsible. As he puts it:

“To fear death (θάνατον δεδιέναι), men, is nothing else than to have the opinion that one is wise (δοκεῖν σοφὸν εἶναι) when one is not. It is to have an opinion that one knows what one does not know, for no one knows whether death doesn’t happen to be the greatest of all goods for a human being, yet they fear it as if they knew well that it is the greatest of evils. How is this not the most disgraceful kind of ignorance, thinking that one knows what one does not know? This is perhaps where I, men, differ from most human beings, and if I appear to anyone to be wiser than someone else, it may be because of this, that since I do not know sufficiently (οὐκ εἰδὼς ἱκανῶς) about the things in Hades, I do not think that I know.” (29a-b)

To fear death implies a view that what happens to us at or after death is bad, but in fact we do not know what happens to us when we die. So to fear death in fact amounts to “the most disgraceful kind of ignorance,” i.e. thinking that one is wise when one is not.

Socrates’ profession of ignorance about death is a component of a broader disavowal of wisdom in the *Apology*. As he puts it in response to the Delphic oracle: “I am aware of myself being wise about neither anything great nor anything small” (21b). With the apparent exception of the basic principle of the badness of injustice (cf. 29b and §5.1), Socrates here claims not to know anything important. On the above reading, Socrates’ moral and epistemic reasons for avoiding the fear of death are compatible with this overall stance of humility and professed ignorance. Far from offending against his disavowal of knowledge and statements of the need for ongoing philosophical investigation, Socrates’ opposition to the fear of death in fact stems from these proto-skeptical principles.

This interpretation might seem to be threatened, however, by how Socrates, near the end of the *Apology*, after he has been condemned to death, offers an argument that there is “great hope” (πολλὴ ἐλπίς) that death is a good thing (40b-c) “To die,” he says, “is one of two things: either the dead man will have no sensation of anything at all, or, as is said, it is really some change and migration for the soul from here to another place.” Whichever half of this dilemma we accept, Socrates argues, death will turn out to be a good thing.
If, on the first view, death is a complete annihilation, it would be comparable to a long night of uninterrupted, dreamless sleep—which, Socrates says, would be “an amazing gain” (40d). This is a strange claim. Death could not be positively pleasurable, since on this view it involves having no sensation at all. In order for it to be a “gain,” Socrates needs to adopt as a covert premise an extremely negative view of lived experience. How, moreover, could anything be a gain for something that does not exist? One might think that Socrates intends for the subject to persist in some minimal way, but his talk of “being nothing” (μηδὲν εἶναι, 40c6) rules this out. (It would seem better to claim, with Epicurus, that death, conceived of as total annihilation, is simply “nothing to us.”)

On the second option, death is a “journey” (ἀποδημία) to another “place” (Hades), where “all the dead are” (40e). There the dead encounter Minos and his brothers, “those who are truly judges,” as opposed to the imperfect judges of this world (41a), as well as earlier human beings, with whom Socrates could continue his favorite activity of philosophical conversation (41b-c). Humans on this view would be assured continued existence and just treatment. But the content of the second option rests on traditional ideas (τὰ λεγόμενα), and Socrates repeatedly emphasizes that the picture holds only conditionally, that is, if these “things said” are really true (cf. 40e, 41b-c).

That Socrates can offer this argument that death is a good thing need not contradict his earlier claim that he lacks “sufficient” knowledge about “the things in Hades.” The dilemmatic structure of the argument means that he is not committed to any particular view about what actually happens to us when we die; nothing suggests that he even favors one of his two options over the other. Nor does he attempt to present the argument rigorously: in particular, he makes no effort to show that the two possibilities he raises exhaust the postmortem possibilities (they do not). So the argument certainly does not give Socrates

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5 Such views are of course found in the Greek tradition. A famous example is from the Oedipus at Colonus of Sophocles, where the chorus sings: μὴ φῦναι τὸν ἅπαντα νικᾷ λόγον, τὸ δ’, ἐπεὶ φανῇ, βῆναι κεῖθεν ὅθεν περ ἥκει πολὺ δεύτερον ὡς τάχιστα (1224-1227).

6 Contra McPherran 1996, 259. While it is true that the two options “non-existence” and “existence (of some sort)” are exhaustive, these are not the options that Socrates presents. In taking it for granted that postmortem existence would be a good thing, Socrates fails to rule out other, less positive conceptions of the
“sufficient knowledge” about death, and indeed he does not claim to know that death is not an evil. The argument’s purpose in context is therapeutic: Socrates aims to console his friends and supporters by giving them hope, rather than knowledge.  

Nonetheless, there does appear to be a significant asymmetry in how Socrates thinks about hope and fear regarding death. Hope was typically analyzed by the ancients as the counterpart of fear, involving an expectation of a future good. Earlier in the *Apology*, Socrates suggested (plausibly) that knowledge of what happens after death is simply not available to human beings, and on these grounds he condemned the fear of death as involving “thinking that one knows what one does not know.” But apparently he does not regard hope about the afterlife, implying the opinion that death is a good thing, as epistemically irresponsible in the same way. This would seem to suggest that for Socrates the moral considerations are ultimately more important than the epistemic ones: an attitude of hope about the afterlife will further insulate our moral calculations from a desire for self-preservation.

As noted in the last chapter, Socrates’ apparent dogmatic confidence in the *Phaedo* about metaphysical matters might seem radically different from his cognitive humility in the *Apology* (or the *Meno*). His position in the opening sections of the *Phaedo*, however, seems closely continuous with that found in the *Apology*, as the rest of this section will show.

Socrates’ two principle interlocutors in the *Phaedo* are Simmias and Cebes, visitors from Thebes; from the *Crito* we learn that they have come to Athens hoping to help Socrates escape (45a-b). They say that they have lived with Philolaus, a leading fifth-century Pythagorean thinker (61e), but they do not seem particularly attached to Pythagorean doctrines. Afterlife (like the Homeric one), and perhaps also the possibility of reincarnation. That Socrates argues this way does not mean that he commits an obvious fallacy; rather, it is a sign that he is arguing on a merely persuasive level.

7 Cicero, in the first book of the *Tusculan Disputations*, employs a very similar strategy to combat the view that death is a bad thing, juxtaposing incompatible arguments for the Epicurean and Platonic positions to create a cocktail of philosophical pharmaceuticals.

8 Cf. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* IV.80: *si spes est expectatio boni, mali expectationem esse necesse est metum.*

9 The nature of their connection to Pythagoreanism is disputed. Among commentators, Burnet 1911 consistently exaggerates it; Rowe 1993 6-7 *et passim* is skeptical. The ancient biographical tradition concerning the pair, at least as represented by Diogenes Laertius (II.15-16), is very meager and includes no reference to
Early in the dialogue, when Socrates maintains that suicide is “not right” (οὐ θέμιτον) and expresses surprise that the Thebans have not already heard about this from Philolaus, Cebes can only recall vaguely that his teacher did say something on the topic, but that it was “nothing clear” (61c-e). If the Pythagoreans did maintain a special prohibition of suicide, it was likely related to their belief in an afterlife involving reincarnation. Simmias and Cebes are apparently uninterested in this sort of thing.

This impression is confirmed a little later, when Socrates cites as a justification for the impermissibility of suicide a different religious tradition, namely the teaching of the mystery cults (ὁ ἐν ἀπορρήτοις λεγόμενος λόγος) that we are possessions of the gods and under their care, and thus ought not to “run away” from our “prison,” i.e. the body (62b). Simmias and Cebes are willing to entertain this view, but protest that if good gods really are our masters and caretakers now, this only makes Socrates’ present willingness to die more bizarre (62c-63a). It does not occur to them that gods could care for human beings after death as well—another sign of their indifference to the afterlife. Socrates responds to their challenge with a kind of declaration of faith:

“If I did not think, Simmias and Cebes, that I would arrive, first of all, among wise and good gods, and then also among human beings who have died and who are better than those here, it would be unfair of me not to be bothered by death. Now, know well that I hope (ἐλπίζω) to arrive among good men—although I wouldn’t assert that with certainty (τοῦτο μὲν οὐκ ἂν πάνυ διισχυρισαίμην). But that I will arrive among gods who are entirely good masters, know well that if I would claim anything with certainty I would claim that. So because of these things I am not bothered, as I would be otherwise. Instead I am of good hope (εὔελπίς εἰμι) that something exists for those who have died and, as is at least traditionally said (ὡσπερ γε καὶ πάλαι λέγεται), something much better for the good than for the bad.” (63b-c)

Socrates thus grounds his decision to go willingly to his death in an appeal to an afterlife that involves not only continued individual existence, but also providential gods, interactions with other dead human beings, and rewards or punishments based on merit. Upon closer examination, however, it is clear that he endorses this picture only in an extremely guarded any Pythagorean affiliation; given the typical uncritically inventive character of the tradition this silence is interesting. For more detail see Horky 2013.
and qualified way: he speaks in terms of “hope,” while vaguely referencing religious traditions. He explicitly denies being certain about whether he will encounter other human beings in the afterlife; the status of his views about the gods is made to hinge on whether he would claim *anything* with certainty (would he?). His views here are moreover strictly about the afterlife, not the immortality of the soul: the words ψυχή and αθάνατος have literally not yet appeared in the *Phaedo*. This is all very close to his position in the *Apology*, including his asymmetric attitude towards fear and hope about death.

The initial position of the characters in the *Phaedo* thus looks somewhat paradoxical. In the *Euthyphro* and the *Apology*, Socrates is portrayed as dedicated to examining and overturning the received religious ideas that others uncritically accept. In the *Phaedo*, by contrast, he appears to be trying to get young men of a scientific bent interested in traditional notions about the afterlife (which he carefully avoids endorsing in a strong sense). Simmias and Cebes are puzzled about and perhaps disapproving of Socrates’ equanimity, which implies that they view death as a bad thing. But in contrast to the lachrymose Apollodorus or Socrates’ wife Xanthippe—who is simply banished by Socrates at the beginning of the *Phaedo*, with no attempt at philosophical therapy—they do not seem to be in any great emotional turmoil.

Simmias asks Socrates for more detail, and Socrates undertakes to defend in detail his willingness to die. This leads into the Defense (63b-69e), discussed in the previous chapter (§ 5.2). Socrates’ explicit objective in the Defense is to show that it is “likely that a man who has really spent his life in philosophy should be confident (θαρρεῖν) when about to die and be of good hope (εὖελπις εἶναι) that there he will obtain the greatest goods once he has met his end” (63e-64a). As in the *Apology*, then, Socrates aims to offer a justification—but one remaining on the level of the “likely” (εἰκός)—for a certain emotional attitude, namely confidence and hope rather than fear in the face of death. The Defense is, in other words,

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a therapeutic argument. This is strikingly brought out by Socrates, with regard to the “genuine philosophers,” in the following passage:

“If they are in every way in conflict with the body, and desire to have the soul on its own by itself, wouldn’t it be great irrationality if they were afraid and annoyed (φοβοῖντο καὶ ἀγανακτοῖεν) when this happened, and didn’t go gladly to the place where, once they arrived, there is hope (ἐλπίς) of getting what they have loved (ἤρων) throughout life—they loved intelligence—and being released from the company of that which they were in conflict with?” (67e-68a)

Two points must be made about this. First, the “great irrationality” (πολλὴ ἀλογία) that Socrates claims is entailed by the fear of death—and which his argument is supposed to combat—must be understood in a richer sense than would be normal in contemporary philosophical parlance. The fear of death, according to Socrates, is not merely an intellectual mistake, but is in fact grounded in an excessive attachment to the body and the sensory world. As Socrates says shortly thereafter, the one who is grieved at death is “not a lover of wisdom but of the body” (i.e. not φιλόσοφος but φιλοσώματος, 67b). In other words, a deeper, non-rational factor is involved here. The second point is that this is a therapeutic argument directed specifically at philosophers, to help them extirpate a deep-seated non-rational attachment that interferes with their pursuit of truth. This attachment to sensory things is in turn connected to the fear of death, since death involves being deprived of all these things. In this way, as in the Apology, therapy against the fear of death is closely linked to the practice of philosophy in general.

6.2 The meaning of trust (pistis)

After the conclusion of Socrates’ Defense, Cebes protests (correctly) that all that Socrates has said about the putative benefits of disembodied cognition has illicitly assumed that the soul will survive death in order to exist in a disembodied state:

“The rest all seems to me to be well said, Socrates, but what you say about the soul is a source of much mistrust (πολλὴν ἀπιστίαν), lest when the soul is released from the body, it is no longer anywhere, but on that day when the human being dies it too is
This worry poses a challenge for Socrates that leads to the entire series of proofs of the immortality of the soul. After Socrates presents his first three arguments, Simmias and Cebes each raise an apparently damaging objection. Phaedo, the narrator of the dialogue, describes to his friend Echecrates the despair that everyone present felt at the time, and Echecrates admits to being similarly troubled:

**Phaedo**: As we heard them speaking, we all had an unpleasant feeling, as we later said to one another. We had been greatly persuaded (σφόδρα πεπεισμένους) by the earlier logos, but now they seemed to stir us up and throw us back down into mistrust (εἰς ἀπιστίαν), not only with regard to the earlier logoi, but also about whatever was later going to be said, in case we were worthless as judges or even the things themselves (τὰ πράγματα αὐτὰ) were not to be trusted (ἀπιστα).

**Echecrates**: By the gods, Phaedo, I can pardon you for that. In fact I was saying something like that to myself just now as I was listening to you. “What logos shall we still trust (πιστεύσομεν)? The logos of Socrates was greatly persuasive (σφόδρα πιθανός), but now has fallen down into mistrust.” (88c-d)

The objections of Simmias and Cebes have not persuaded anyone; they have merely overturned the previous arguments, so that no positive conclusion is left standing at all. The juxtaposition of opposing logoi has led the audience to doubt the power of philosophical arguments in general.

Phaedo reassures Echecrates that Socrates admirably “cured” (ἰάσατο) his listeners and “urged them on” (προύτρεψεν) to the shared examination of the argument (89a). Before actually answering the objections, Socrates begins his cure by warning his listeners not to become “misologists” (μισόλογοι), haters of logoi. Commentators who discuss this interlude in the *Phaedo* tend to see it as a simple protreptic exhortation: the misologists described

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11 One might wonder whether μὴ οὐδεὶς ἄξιοι εἶμεν κριταὶ ἤ καὶ τὰ πράγματα αὐτὰ ἀπιστα ἤ (88c6-7) should be taken with reference to the matter of the immortality of the soul specifically or to “things” more generally, but the latter reading is much more natural and supported by how τὰ πράγματα is used elsewhere in the dialogue (cf. 66e1, 90c3, 99e3). Socrates, in any case, responds to the more general concern.
by Socrates naïvely reject philosophical arguments due to their lack of dialectical acumen, which Socrates accordingly urges his listeners to cultivate. Against this protreptic reading, I will argue that Socrates presents the misologists as a type of proto-skeptic and in fact shows some covert sympathy for their position; his criticism of them is much more subtle than usually recognized. This passage in the Phaedo is thus one of the earliest sustained engagements with skeptical ideas in ancient philosophical texts.

In the passage just quoted, Phaedo and Echecrates characterize the kind of doubt to which they have been led in terms of “trust” (πίστις), and “mistrust” (ἀπιστία)—rather than, say, in terms of the possibility or impossibility of knowledge. Socrates’ listeners, according to Phaedo, are all worried that both “the things themselves” and logoi concerning them are “not to be trusted.” The cluster of terms around πίστις—including also the adjective πιστός, the verb πιστεύειν, and their respective antonyms (ἀπιστία, ἄπιστος, ἀπιστεῖν)—plays an important role throughout the Phaedo. The first appearance of this terminology is in the pivotal protest of Cebes quoted above. Simmias then denies “mistrusting” the thesis that learning is recollection (73b), while also admitting that he does not recall the details. At the conclusion of the Recollection Argument, Simmias calls Cebes “the most stubborn of all human beings in mistrusting logoi” (77a), and Cebes later lives up to this by framing his objection in terms of “mistrust” (87a-e). But after the so-called Final Argument, Cebes declares that he can no longer “mistrust” the thesis of the soul’s immortality; Simmias

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12 Bostock 1986 does not discuss the passage. Brief comments are given by Hackforth 1952, 109-111; Gallop 1973, 153-155; and Rowe 1993, 210-216. More detailed treatments are offered in the monographs of Dorter 1982, 88-97; Burger 1984, 112-121; White 1989, 132-138; Frede 1999, 85-90; and, most recently, Ebert 2004, 301-305, who (representing more or less the communis opinio) sees the passage as “ein Plädoyer” from Socrates for “die Notwendigkeit einer Schulung in der Kunst des Argumentierens.” To my knowledge, the only dedicated study of the passage (with concerns somewhat similar to mine, but a different point of entry) is Woolf 2007, to which Wood 2007 is a response.

13 I will use the term “skeptic” for advocates of a global suspension of judgment, and “proto-skeptic” for those advocating a suspension of judgment of significant but restricted scope, while still holding some dogmatic views.

14 These words appear at least twenty-two times in the dialogue (at 69e3 and 86e5, editors have excised as interpolations phrases involving ἄπιστα that are found in the manuscripts). The majority of these instances involve the privative ἄπιστα- terms. Yet Dorter 1982, 94 is the only scholar, to my knowledge, who explicitly remarks on the importance of πίστις in the Phaedo and applies it to the interpretation of the misology episode.

238
by contrast confesses that, although he “has no basis to mistrust” what has been said, he nonetheless still does, given the weightiness of the topic and human weakness (107a-b).

The need for “trust” rather than “mistrust” is thus brought up at practically every moment of transition in the _Phaedo_. Both Socrates and his interlocutors present the purpose of the arguments in the dialogue as not only, or even primarily, to _prove_ the postmortem survival of the soul, but rather to foster trust in it. Given this, the task of the rest of this section will be to describe more precisely the meaning of πίστις. I do not mean to claim here that Plato or any other philosopher uses the term in a strictly consistent or technical way: my aim is merely to point out some important factors that govern the word’s employment in philosophical Greek.

The noun πίστις is derived from the aorist stem of the verb πείθειν (“to persuade”), making it cognate with Latin _fides_ and _foedus_, as well as with English “faith.” The original semantic domain of the πιστ- root was that of interpersonal relations, as in the Homeric formulae ὅρκια πιστά (“trusty oaths”) and πιστὸς ἑταῖρος (“trusty comrade”). Although the noun can have a variety of subtly related senses, its most common use in Plato is as a _nomen rei actae_ denoting the result or product of persuasion. This is made explicit in the _Gorgia_, where Socrates describes rhetoric as the art that causes an audience to have πίστις (454c-455a). The role of πίστις in the _Phaedo_ must thus be interpreted within the broader context of the motif of persuasion and the use of rhetorical terminology in the dialogue.

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15 On the etymology, cf. Beekes 2010 _s. v. πείθομαι_.

16 The nouns πίστις and ἀπίστια, absent from Homer, occur for the first time in Hesiod in a gnomic statement (πίστεις δ’ ἄρα ὁμῶς καὶ ἀπιστίαι ἄνδρας, _Works and Days_ 372) following a recommendation to get a witness when agreeing on a wage. (For a survey of the development of “trust” as a social concept in ancient Greece, though without a focus on the specific terminology of πίστις, see Johnstone 2011.) The earliest philosophical use of the term comes in the poem of Parmenides, in which the goddess tells him that he must “learn everything, both the well-rounded, unshaking heart of truth, and the opinions (δόξας) of mortals, in which there is no true πίστις” (fr. 1.51-53 Diels-Kranz, cf. fr. 8.11-12, 28).

17 For instance, “pledge,” “evidence,” “loyalty,” “credibility,” and so on. For examples, cf. Hay 1989, 461-463, who discusses the development of the term’s meaning in Judeo-Christian texts. One important meaning is an active one, picking out the ground, cause, or means of persuasion. This meaning is common in e.g. Aristotle’s _Rhetoric_ and may be intended by Parmenides (cf. footnote 16) and by Cebes at _Phaedo_ 70b (quoted above).

18 On persuasion in the _Phaedo_, see Peterson 2011, 172-176.
As the product of persuasion, trust is, for Plato, a deficient cognitive state. It is first of all fallible: in the Gorgias it is distinguished from learning (μάθησις) and knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) on the grounds that it can be either true or false. In this, trust is like “opinion” (δόξα). Trust and opinion are distinguished first of all by the former’s interpersonal nuance: part of what is deficient about trust is precisely that it is often dependent on the testimony or authority of others, as in the acceptance of traditional mythical or religious beliefs. But the term itself picks out the subjective cognitive state of the one who trusts. Strictly speaking, for a person or a logos to be “trusty” (πιστός) thus does not mean that they are objectively worthy of trust, but rather that they inspire trust for someone. The meaning of the adjective is thus virtually a synonym of πιθανός (“persuasive”), a term that Echecrates applies to Socrates’ arguments in the Phaedo (88d). This is neatly illustrated by a remark in Aristotle’s Rhetoric: “The persuasive (τὸ πιθανόν) is persuasive for someone: sometimes it is persuasive and trusty (πιθανὸν καὶ πιστόν) right away on account of itself, sometimes because it seems to have been shown through things that are such” (I.2, 1356b27-30).

“The persuasive” is in turn closely related to “the likely” (τὸ εἰκός): in the context of rhetorical persuasion, trust rests on taking what is likely as a guide to the real. An extension of this idea underlies Socrates’ use of the term πίστις in Republic VI-VII for the

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19 The contrast drawn in the Gorgias is one that Plato elsewhere draws between knowledge and opinion (cf. Republic 477e, Theaetetus 152c), leading to a terminological variation. In Republic X, Socrates similarly claims that the flute-maker makes his flutes by “trusting” (πιστεύων) in what he hears from the flute-player (601e); the flutemaker who possesses “correct trust” (πίστιν ὀρθήν) about flutes is explicitly contrasted with “the one who knows” (ὁ εἰδώς). Later δόξα seems to be substituted for πίστις (602a).

20 Cf. Gorgias 524a-b (ἀ ἑγὼ ἀκηκοών πιστεύω ἐλευθῆ ἐλευθή, referring to the myth of the afterlife), Meno 81e (πιστεύων ἀληθῆ ἐλευθῆ, referring to the immortality of the soul and the theory of recollection, offered on the authority of certain priests, priestesses, and poets), and Timaeus 40d-e (regarding traditional accounts of the gods, we should not ἀπιστεῖν; rather, ἐπομένους τῷ νόμῳ πιστεύσαι). Some other examples of πίστις/πιστεύειν in Plato with the sense of “belief on the basis of oral or written testimony” occur at Charmides 161a, Cratylus 399a, Laches 181b, Phaedrus 275a, Republic 439e.

21 Earlier in the Phaedo, Socrates twice expresses the hope that his “Defense,” in which he introduces the notion of philosophy as practice for dying, will be “more persuasive” (πιθανότερος) than his earlier speech before the Athenian jury (63b, 69e). The word’s rhetorical associations are clear. Besides the remark of Echecrates, these are the only occurrences of the term πιθανός in the dialogue.

22 The πιθανός and the eikós are equated by Socrates at Phaedrus 272d-e, and Socrates frequently qualifies claims in the Phaedo as “likely” (63c, 67a, 70b, 78c). But Plato’s use of eikós (e.g. in the Timaeus) involves broader problems that cannot be treated here: cf. Frede 1999, 36-38.
kind of cognition represented by the second-lowest segment of the Divided Line (511d, 533e-534a). Here the two lower sections represent different cognitive attitudes related to the realm of things that are objects of opinion (τὸ δοξαστὸν). Trust and “imagination” (εἰκασία), the attitude represented by the lowest section, are distinguished from one another by their objects: imagination deals with images (εἰκόνες), such as shadows and reflections, while trust is concerned with their originals, e.g. animals, plants, and artifacts (509e-510a). I take it that imagination involves having an opinion based on the perception of images with the awareness that they are only images. By contrast, trust involves opinions based on the perception of things in the sensory world with the conviction that they are a faithful, “trusty” guide to reality; such an attitude of trust underlies all our everyday undertakings. There is of course a sense in which for Plato sensible things are themselves only images of higher realities.

To understand the role of πίστις in the Phaedo, however, we need to attend to a further feature of how the term is used in philosophical Greek. This is that πίστις, in contrast to δόξα, is often used when an author wants to pick out the strength of cognitive attachment to a view. Trust in other words admits of degrees, as when Empedocles speaks of “feeble trust” (λιπόξυλος πίστις) and Epicurus of “stablest trust” (βεβαιοτάτη πίστις). This specific usage can be most vividly illustrated with some examples from Aristotle:

[1] Opinion comes to be both true and false, but trust follows opinion (δόξῃ ἕπεται πίστις), for it is not possible for someone who has an opinion (δοξάζοντα) not to trust (πιστεύειν) in how it seems to him. (De anima III.3, 428a19-22)

23 The literature on εἰκασία is large. The interpretation of the division of labor between imagination and trust that I adopt here is a minority one, defended by Klein 1965, 114-115 and most recently by Dominick 2010. The standard view holds that imagination involves a confusion of image and original, but, as Dominick points out, people looking at shadows and reflections are not typically confused in this way.

24 In the Phaedo Socrates seems to denigrate this form of trust, claiming that philosophy directs one to trust (πιστεύειν) nothing else than “whichever of the things that are, taken on its own by itself, that the soul understands (νοήσῃ) on its own by itself,” and in particular not the senses (83a-b).

25 This reading also makes good sense of a well-known passage in the Timaeus, where Timaeus claims that “as being is to becoming, so is truth to πίστις” (29c). Here πίστις is the cognitive state that the “likely story” (εἰκός μίθος) about the cosmos, itself only an image of an original paradigm (29b), is meant to inspire.

[2] If it is due to their weaker trust (τὸ ἠρέμα πιστεύειν) that people who have opinions (οἱ δοξάζοντες) will act against their supposition (ὑπόληψιν) more than those who have knowledge (τῶν ἐπισταμένων), then there will be no difference here between knowledge and opinion. For some people trust no less (πιστεύοντες οὐδὲν ἦττον) in what they opine than others do in what they know. (Nicomachean Ethics VII.3, 1146b27-30)

[3] One must not only say what is true, but also give an explanation for the false view, for this contributes to trust (συμβάλλεται πρὸς τὴν πίστιν). For whenever the explanation of why it appears true when it is not appears reasonable, this makes one trust more (πιστεύειν μᾶλλον) in the truth. (Nicomachean Ethics VII.14, 1154a22-25)

[4] That the heaven as a whole was neither generated nor is able to be destroyed, as some claim it can be, … one can obtain trust (λαμβάνειν τὴν πίστιν) from what has been said and from the opinion of those who claim otherwise and make it begotten. For if it is possible for it to be in the way [that we say it is], but not possible in the way that they say, this would have great weight for trust (μεγαλὴν ῥοπὴν εἰς πίστιν) concerning the immortality and eternality of the heavens. (De caelo II.1, 283b26-284a2)

In [1] and [2], πίστις is clearly distinct from δόξα: trust is a kind of “pro-attitude” that is attached to a fallible opinion. This attitude can vary in strength, as shown by the use of comparative adverbs in [2] and [3]. In [4], Aristotle emphasizes this point using the metaphor of weight. Since the immortality of the cosmos, like the immortality of the soul, is a thesis for which empirical confirmation is not available, trust in the view must be deliberately cultivated, to whatever degree this is possible.

Having laid this terminological groundwork, we can better appreciate the nature of the psychological crisis experienced by Phaedo and his friends, in which they come to doubt that logoi and even “the things themselves” are such as to be trusted. This is no mere state of aporia about whether the soul is immortal; rather, they face the prospect of losing the ability to feel conviction about any opinion at all. We can now turn to Socrates’ response, in which the notion of trust continues to play a prominent role.

6.3 Misology and misanthropy (Phaedo 89d-90d)

Socrates begins his cure with an exhortation. Let us take care, he says:

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27 By contrast, it would be linguistically odd in ancient Greek to “opine” more or less, i.e. μᾶλλον or ἦττον δοξάζειν.

28 I leave aside here the exchange between Socrates and Phaedo at 89a-c.
“...lest we become misologists, just as some people become misanthropes (μισάνθρωποι).
For there is no greater evil that one can experience than this, coming to hate logoi.
Misology and misanthropy come about in the same way. Misanthropy creeps in from having greatly trusted in someone (σφόδρα τινὶ πιστεύσαι), but without art (ἄνευ τέχνης), and having thought that the person is entirely true and healthy and trusty (πιστός ὑγιὴς καὶ ἀληθὴς καὶ ἑταῖρος), but then a little later finding out that he is bad and not to be trusted (πονηρὸς καὶ ἄπιστος), and then the same thing with someone else. And when someone has experienced this many times, especially at the hands of those whom he considered his closest comrades (οἰκειοτάτους καὶ ἑταῖροι), then finally, having often been mistaken, he hates everyone and thinks that there is nothing healthy in anyone at all.” (89d-e)

The claim that hating logoi is the worst evil for a person (worse than hating human beings!) is slightly surprising, given that Socrates has just recently asserted in the Phaedo that “the greatest and most extreme of all evils” for the human soul is to consider the visible world to be “most manifest and most true,” when it in fact is not (83c). But as Gallop suggests, the two formulations are compatible: to seek truth in the sensible world is opposed to seeking it in logoi. Later on in the dialogue, in the famous description of his “second sailing,” Socrates explicitly contrasts the usual practice of “looking at things (τὰ πράγματα) with the eyes and each of the other senses” with his choice to “flee to logoi and in them examine the truth of the things that are” (99e). In this light, the warning against misology looks less like a digressive interlude than part of Socrates’ attack throughout the Phaedo on investment in the sensory world.

The comparison to misanthropy gives a prominent role to “trust” in its original interpersonal sense: misanthropy results from “having greatly trusted in someone” (notice the use of the intensifying adverb σφόδρα with the verb πιστεύσαι). Socrates now elaborates further on the situation of the misanthrope:

SOCRATES: Isn’t [misanthropy] shameful, and isn’t it clear that such a person was trying to deal with people without the art concerned with human affairs (ἄνευ τέχνης τὰς περὶ τὰνθρώπων)? If he had dealt with them using the art, then he would have

29 As Burnet 1911, 89 remarks ad loc., the use of the plural λόγους here rules out the interpretation of μισολογία as “hatred of reason.” I can find no advocate for this interpretation besides Moses Mendelssohn, who uses Vernunftbasser in his adaptation of Plato’s dialogue, Phädon.
known how things are: very good and bad people (τοὺς μὲν χρηστοὺς καὶ πονηροὺς 
σφόδρα) are both few, but those in between (τοὺς δὲ μεταξύ) are very many.

PHAEDO: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: The same as with very small and very large things. Do you think there’s anything rarer to find than a human being, or dog, or anything else, that’s very large or very small? Or fast or slow or ugly or beautiful or white or black? Haven’t you perceived that the outer extremes in all such cases are rare and few, while those in between are abundant and many?

PHAEDO: Of course.

SOCRATES: Don’t you think that if a contest of badness was set up, there too the first place winners would turn out to be very few?

PHAEDO: Likely so. (89e-90b)

The ultimate cause of misanthropy is the lack of “the art concerned with human affairs.” The one who possesses this art would know that “very good and very bad people are both rare, while most people are in between.” Phaedo oddly does not understand this rather simple idea, and Socrates offers him a detailed explanation. Socrates’ point here might remind one of the view, developed in e.g. Republic V, that opposites are copresent in all sensible things, such that nothing is good or bad or beautiful or ugly or large or small in absolutely all respects and in all relations. But here Socrates goes further: even excellent exemplars of these qualities are very rare, to say nothing of perfect instantiations.

Having rather belabored this point, Socrates then immediately rejects it as irrelevant to his comparison between misology and misanthropy:

“But that’s not the way in which logos are similar to human beings—I was following your lead just now—but rather in this way: whenever someone trusts that some logos is true (πιστεύσῃ λόγῳ τινὶ ἀληθεῖ εἶναι) without the art concerned with logos, and then a little later it seems to him to be false, sometimes actually being so, sometimes not, and then likewise with another logos and another…” (90b)

Misanthropy and misology thus both involve a loss of trust due ultimately to a lack of art. But what precisely is the dissimilarity between people and logos that limits the force of the

31 The placement of σφόδρα here is unusual, but this translation seems confirmed by parallels in the next few lines, as Rowe 1993, 213 says ad loc.

32 As Burnet 1911, 90 notes ad loc., the subordinate clause beginning with ἐπειδάν in 90b6 is never followed by a main clause giving the consequence of the misologists’ experience.
analogy? The type of logos analogous to a good person would seem to be a sound logos, establishing a true conclusion. (Socrates anticipates this aspect of the comparison with his choice of words when he says that the future misanthrope initially considers another person “true and healthy and trusty.”) So if logoi were in every respect like people, then Socrates’ comparison would imply that both true, sound (i.e. good) logoi and false, unsound (i.e. bad) logoi are very rare.

Commentators have sometimes explained the problem with the analogy so understood by pointing out that bad arguments are not in fact rare. But the dissimilarity might seem to go deeper than this. One might protest that it is not the case, as the analogy would suggest, that any (let alone most) logoi are situated on a continuum in between soundness and unsoundness or truth and falsehood. These are exhaustive binary divisions, not continua. In this way, logoi do not resemble people. But if this is right, why does Socrates “follow Phaedo’s lead” and explain at length precisely the fact about people that will be misleading in the context of the analogy with logoi? It is unlikely that Plato includes this prima facie pointless eddy in the conversation without a reason.

I take it that this false start covertly invites us to look for a way in which the rejected aspect of the analogy with people does hold, i.e. a way in which logoi are (mostly, at least)

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33It is unusual (in ancient Greek as in English) to call a person “true” (ἀληθής) without qualification (as opposed to calling them a “true doctor” or “true friend”), but the application to a logos is natural. Woolf 2007, 3 and Gallop 1975, 154 worry about calling “arguments” true or false. Here the broader meaning of logos is relevant: it certainly makes sense to talk about a “true account” or a “true story.” And even when logos means argument, it can be called “true” in ancient Greek: thus we find an ἀποδείξις described as a type of ἀληθὴς λόγος (Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrhonian Outlines II.143, elucidating the standard Stoic definition). The adjective “healthy” (ὑγιής) here does not designate physical health, but is rather meant in its common sense of “sound” or “not deceptive,” in which it applies to thought or speech, not people. For this transferred sense, cf. e.g. Homer, Iliad VIII.524 (μῦθος δ’ ὁνὶν ὑγιὴς εἰρημένος ἐστω—the only occurrence of the word ὑγιής in Homer, here applied to speech); Euripides, Andromache 448-449 (ἐλκτὰ κοὐδὲν ὑγιὲς ἀλλὰ πάν τῶν πέρις φρονοντὸς, of the Spartans); Herodotus, I.8 (Δέσποτα, τίνα λέγεις λόγον οὐκ ὑγιέα, κελεύων με δέσποιναν τὴν ἐμὴν θεήσασθαι γυμμήν); Thucydides, III.75.4 (ὡς οὐδὲν αὐτῶν ὑγιές διανοομένων). Notice that the meaning is not always “sound” in the sense that we might employ when talking of arguments; in Euripides and Thucydides it means “not deceptive.”

34So Hackforth 1953, 107n2; Rowe 1993, 213; and Ebert 2004, 302.

35This point is noticed, but not further developed, by Dorter 1982, 89; Burger 1984, 117; and Frede 1999, 87.

36The only commentator who seems to ask this question is White 1989, 135, who thinks that the validity of the Cyclical Argument earlier in the dialogue is thus challenged. Against this, it might be pointed out that the terminology of ἐναντία and γύναις, crucial to the Cyclical Argument, are not used here.
in between being “good” and “bad.” Here is one proposal for making sense of this. In developing his analogy, Socrates refers repeatedly to the experience of “trust,” which, as I have shown, can pick out the strength of cognitive attachment to a view. This is a matter of degree. With respect to their power to inspire trust, i.e. to persuade, *logoi* can indeed be situated on a spectrum, just like people with respect to their character. In ordinary English we often say things like “that’s a very good argument” or “there were powerful arguments on both sides.” In such implicitly comparative expressions, we are not attending to soundness in a formal sense; rather, we are talking about the degree to which we find the arguments subjectively convincing. A good *logos*, in this sense, is a persuasive one, inspiring confidence. Persuasiveness is obviously not coextensive with soundness: unsound arguments often persuade people, while sound ones often do not.

This is especially plausible if we remember that the Greek word *logos* has a very broad meaning, including speeches and accounts in general, even stories, i.e. forms of discourse to which the criteria of logical validity and soundness cannot be applied. Even when (as often) *logos* in Plato’s texts is appropriately translated as “argument,” we should not assume that an anachronistically technical sense is involved. Relevant here is a moment later in the *Phaedo* when, after Socrates begins his attack on the objection that the soul is like a tuning, Simmias confesses that:

“This *logos* came to me without proof (*ἀνεύ ἀποδείξεως*), but with a certain likeliness and attractive appearance (*μετὰ εἰκότος τῶν καί εὐπρεπείας*), which is why most people like it. But I know that *logoi* that make their proofs through likelinesses are tricksters, and if one doesn’t carefully guard against them, they will very often deceive, both in geometry and in all other subjects.” (92c-d)

Here Simmias appears to distinguish between a mere *logos* and a proof (*ἀπόδειξις*). The *logoi* that he and Simmias offered were after all not deductive arguments, or logical criticisms of Socrates’ arguments, but rather rival “pictures” of what the soul is like. His point as it relates to geometry is that proofs are reliable when they depend on deductions rather than inferences from imperfect diagrams. Philosophical proofs, Simmias implies, are much the

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Implicit in this is the notion that geometrical proofs are paradigmatic for proofs in general, and that philosophy should thus ideally be done more geometrico. This ideal would be of lasting influence: two millennia later Descartes would boast that his arguments about the soul in the *Meditations* “equal or even surpass those of geometry in certainty and evidence.”

This ideal, however, is put forward by Simmias, not Socrates. My suggestion is that Socrates does not in fact share it. His primary ambition in the *Phaedo* is to offer an argument for the immortality of the soul that will supply trust, not something like demonstrative proof. Simmias’s comparison between philosophical arguments and geometrical proofs moreover faces a very obvious problem, familiar to ancients and moderns alike. This is that geometrical and mathematical proofs generally command universal acceptance, while many (most?) well-known and much-studied philosophical arguments do not, even (especially?) among those with philosophical training. The notion that deductive arguments can be in principle classified as either sound or unsound is a foundational assumption of most philosophical discourse. But the fact of deep and persistent philosophical disagreements might lead us to be skeptical that any objective criterion of soundness in *logoi* is in fact [38]...

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[38] Simmias’s terminology is somewhat confused: in the first sentence, he seems to be drawing a clear contrast between a rigorous proof and a mere picture or likeliness, yet in the next sentence he suggests that there are “proofs” (ἀποδείξεις) that are made “through likelinesses” (διὰ τῶν εἰκότων). This appearance of confusion may be deliberate on Plato’s part (Simmias and Cebes evidently have no clear idea about what constitutes proof), but it also illustrates that Plato does not share Aristotle’s technical notion of “demonstration” (ἀπόδειξις) as a deduction that leads to knowledge (*Posterior Analytics* I.2, 71b17-19). The term ἀπόδειξις sometimes has the sense of “philosophical argument” in the *Phaedo* (cf. e.g. 73c, 77c-d), but it is often hard to tell if this is not just a non-technical extension of the literal sense of “showing.” The one Platonic passage that clearly anticipates the Aristotelian sense—again in connection with geometry—is found at *Theaetetus* 162e, where Socrates imagines how Protagoras would accuse him and Theaetetus of δημηγορία: “You do not give any demonstration and necessity (ἀπόδειξιν καὶ ἀνάγκην), but rather make use of the likely (τῷ εἰκότι χρῆσθε). If Theodorus or any other geometer should be willing to use this in geometry, he would be worthless.”

[39]... certitudine et evidentia geometricas [rationes] aequare, vel etiam superare (*Meditations on First Philosophy*, Dedicatory Epistle 5). Even though Descartes believes that his arguments do meet this standard, he admits that persuasiveness depends on other factors as well. He worries that his proofs “will not be sufficiently grasped by most people, both because they too are rather long and one depends on another, but also especially because they require a mind completely free from prejudices and which easily removes itself from commerce with the senses.”
available to us. We have seen how a prominent contemporary philosopher of religion takes persuasiveness as the basic criterion for identifying “successful arguments”—and concludes that (at least with respect to the existence of god) there are no such arguments (§ 1.4).

If this is right, then the persuasiveness of *logoi* for particular people rests not on their soundness but on their presentation—their “attractive appearance,” as Simmias puts it—and other features of the dialectical context, in particular on the prior attitudes of the philosophers themselves towards the conclusions to be established, attitudes which may in turn be rooted in biases, fears, wishful thinking, and so on. These factors are very obviously in play in an investigation of our postmortem fate, but their influence on philosophical disputes is in fact ubiquitous. That Plato is attuned to this ubiquitous phenomenon is doubtless one reason why he chose to write dialogues, a literary form that emphasizes the particularities of the dialectical situation and the interlocutors involved. Socrates’ abandoned analogy between misology and misanthropy (as well as the prominent concern with “trust” throughout the *Phaedo*) thus points to a crucial point about Plato’s conception of philosophy.

Socrates now turns to a denunciation of the most extreme misologists:

“And most of all, those who’ve made a practice of giving contradictory *logoi* (οἱ περὶ τῶν ἀντιλογικῶν λόγων διατρίψαντες)—you know how they end up thinking that they are extremely wise and are the only ones who have noticed that none of the things (τῶν πραγμάτων) at all are either healthy or stable (βέβαιον), or any of the *logoi*, but all of the things that are (πάντα τὰ ὄντα) are simply turned up and down as if in the Euripus Strait and do not remain anywhere for any length of time.” (90b-c)

The “antilogicians” (ἀντιλογικοί), the practitioners of “antilogic” or “the art of contradiction” (ἀντιλογική, derived from the verb ἀντιλέγειν, “to contradict, argue against”), are a group mentioned fairly often in Plato’s dialogues. Here they are apparently the most advanced

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40 For the Pyrrhonian skeptics, the “undecided conflict among the philosophers” was the basis of the first of the five so-called “tropes” of Agrippa leading to suspension of judgment (Sextus Empiricus, *Pyrrhonian Outlines* 1.165). For recent perspectives on philosophical disagreement, see Kelly 2003 and Brennan 2010.

41 Oppy 2006.

42 The antilogicians come up again later in the *Phaedo*, also in a critical light, during Socrates’ explanation of the method of hypothesis. Here he warns Cebes not to “mix things up like the antilogicians, talking about the first principle (περὶ τῆς ἀρχῆς διαλεγόμενοι) and the things derived from it at the same time, if indeed you want to find any of the things that are (τῶν ἄντων). They [i.e. the antilogicians] probably have no *logos* at all about this, nor care about it; in their wisdom they are able to be well pleased with themselves when they...

248
and articulately misologists, who have been led by their experience with arguments to an ontological view apparently similar to the flux-theory associated elsewhere by Plato with Heraclitus, whereby nothing “remains anywhere for any length of time” (χρόνον οὐδένα ἐν οὐδενὶ μένει).

Now, while the word “misologist” was presumably invented by Plato as a term of abuse, ἀντιλογικός occurs already in Aristophanes (Clouds 1173) and is a label that some intellectuals in Classical Greece likely claimed for themselves. Protagoras, for instance, according to Diogenes Laertius, claimed that “there are two logoi, opposed to (ἀντικειμένους) each other, about every thing” (XI.51) and wrote a work called Contradictions (Ἀντιλογίαι, IX.55, cf. III.37), now lost but perhaps similar in character to the extant Dissoi Logoi, in which various arguments are offered for and against the same position. The explicit invocation of the antilogicians thus marks an important shift. Socrates is no longer just warning his listeners to avoid becoming naïve, embittered anti-intellectuals: he is attacking real, contemporary opponents.

But are the antilogicians really Socrates’ opponents? In fact ἀντιλογική does not have an intrinsically negative connotation in Plato. Strictly speaking, antilogic is merely the mix everything up together” (101e). The passage is much debated, but the point of Socrates’ criticism seems to be that the antilogicians do not hold their hypotheses constant and declare false whatever contradicts with them or their consequences; rather they take contradictions to disqualify the hypotheses. This criticism in fact calls attention to a potential vulnerability of the hypothetical method, namely that it may lead one to rely uncritically on undemonstrated assumptions.

43 Cf. Cratylus 401d-402c, Theaetetus 179d-180b. Plato’s version of the theory may owe more to the Ephesian philosopher’s later disciples, like Cratylus. Heraclitus himself was certainly not, at any rate, a hater of logos, a concept that plays a central (if obscure) role in his thought.

44 The μισολογ- compound does not appear in extant texts prior to Plato. Outside of the Phaedo it occurs once in the Republic (411d) and twice in the Laches (188c-e). It then does not appear again until Plutarch.

45 Cf. the enumeration of genres of literary prose in the Antidosis of Isocrates (a speech delivered in 353 BCE), where antilogic is listed among perfectly respectable genres like historiography and is connected with the dialectical practice of trading questions and answers (45-46). For more on this text, dated tentatively to around 400 BCE, see the recent edition of Becker and Scholz 2004. This text deals with many themes that to us sound distinctively “Socratic,” for instance the question of whether the virtues can be taught (Ch. 6) or the ideal of the wise man (Ch. 8) who both “knows the truth” and “can speak in public (δαμαγορεῖν) and knows the arts concerning speeches (λόγων τέχνας).”

46 As is shown by Kerferd 1981, 62-67, who calls the question of “the true nature of antilogic...in many ways the key to the problem of understanding the true nature of the sophistic movement” (62). Kerferd emphasizes that the technique of antilogic must be distinguished from eristic (ἐριστική), the practice of doing anything to win an argument, which does have a negative connotation in Plato.
argumentative strategy of opposing one *logos* to a contradictory one. This is in essence Socrates’ own technique, as presented in many of Plato’s dialogues, for refuting people and bringing them to *aporia*.[48] Furthermore, as Kerferd points out, Socrates’ remark here on the antilogicians’ flux-theory—that they think that they “are the only ones (*μόνοι*) who have noticed” that all things are in flux (90c)—implies an underlying *agreement* about the instability of sensible things.[49] Plato’s attitude towards the theory of flux is debated, but Socrates clearly accepts some version of it in the *Phaedo* with respect to the sensible world (cf. 78c-79a).

The antilogicians thus appear to have gotten some things right, from Socrates’ perspective. Yet Socrates suggests, and Phaedo agrees, that all misologists are much to be pitied:

> “Wouldn’t it be a pitiable experience, Phaedo, if—there being in fact some true and stable *logos* and it being possible to comprehend it—on account of coming upon some *logoi* that were such as to sometimes seem to the same people to be true and sometimes not, someone did not blame himself and his own lack of art (*ἀτεχνίαν*), but ended up, on account of the pain, pushing off the blame from himself onto the *logoi* and spent the rest of his life hating and reviling them, and was deprived of truth and knowledge of the things that are?” (90c-d)

This condemnation of the misologists as pathetic and cowardly relies on two epistemologically optimistic premises, which Socrates expresses in a genitive absolute: there in fact exists “some true and stable *logos*” and it is possible to grasp it (*ἀντιστασίας* δή *τινος* ἀληθοῦς καὶ βεβαιοῦν λόγων καὶ δυνατοῦ κατανόησαι, 90c9-d1).[50] Both premises—about the nature of *logos* itself, on the one hand, and our own cognitive abilities, on the other—are simply assumed without defense, even though the misologist would clearly deny or suspend judgment on one or both.

On the protreptic reading of the passage, Socrates is criticizing the misologists for failing to see that while many *logoi* do turn out to be unsound and false, some are sound and

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[48] Socrates explicitly appeals to antilogical technique at *Lysis* 216a-b. The treatment of antilogic in the *Sophist* (225a-e, 229b-231b, 232b-235a) is complex, but at various points the characterization and critique offered by the Eleatic Stranger are clearly meant to be reminiscent of Socrates (cf. esp. 225b, 230b-d), apparently in order to stress the kinship between Socratic and sophistic procedure. (This passage is strangely not discussed by Kerferd 1981, although it clearly shows that Plato’s attitude to antilogic cannot be unambiguously negative.)


[50] In accord with his position elsewhere in the dialogue, Socrates here makes no suggestion that *things* (τὰ πράγματα) are stable; he holds out this possibility only with regard to *logoi*.
true and can be recognized as such, if one possesses the relevant art. We can now see why the protreptic reading is unsatisfactory. For Socrates’ critique, so understood, seems to be little more than a disingenuous *ad hominem* attack. He condescendingly supplies the misologists with an intellectual biography in order to declare them embittered and lacking in self-awareness, while merely begging the question against the substance of their proto-skeptical position and ignoring the points on which their views seem quite similar to his own. Even the label “misologist” itself seems polemical and unfair: the antilogicians, at least, who make use of contradictory *logoi*, can hardly be haters of *logoi* in a total sense.  

There is, however, another way to understand Socrates’ criticism. I have suggested that he uses the “false start” in his analogy between misology and misanthropy to covertly call attention to how *logoi*, like people, can be situated on a spectrum, in terms of their power to inspire trust. Reflection on the diverse grounds for subjective credence raises the question of whether, at least as a practical matter, *logoi* can be reliably and objectively certified as sound. Perhaps, then, from Socrates’ perspective the misologists are not necessarily mistaken in their pessimism about *logoi*. The genitive absolute containing his two premises at 90c9-d1 can have conditional force: *if* there is some stable * logos* and *if* we can comprehend it, then the misologists are in a lamentable fix. Socrates’ point is not that the misologists are wrong; rather, *if* they are wrong, then it is a great loss for them, while there is little to be gained from the wager if they turn out to be right. Their inability to trust in *logoi* is thus unfortunate, even if in a certain sense justified.

This reading suggests an explanation for Socrates’s striking emphasis in this passage on the need for “the art concerned with *logoi*” (τῆς περὶ τοὺς λόγους τέχνης, 90b). Commentators usually assume this art to be dialectic, which fits with the protreptic reading: Socrates is exhorting his audience to acquire dialectical expertise in order to avoid falling into misology.  

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51 As Ebert 2004, 304 points out.
52 Gallop 1975 translates this way; cf. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* §2070d.
But the antilogicians, at least, as expert public arguers, already possess dialectical skill. Presumably, then, the skill that Socrates is recommending is not gymnastic dialectic, i.e. skill in coming up with winning arguments for any given position (and its opposite), but something more like logic, i.e. skill in evaluating the soundness of arguments. It is true that an expert in logic might be more likely to avoid placing trust in arguments that are invalid. In contrast to Aristotle, however, Plato does not develop (or allude to) any such discipline.

And Socrates’ peculiar presentation of his analogy with misanthropy casts at least some doubt on the possibility of such an art to begin with.

Finally, if Plato did have dialectic in mind here, it is odd that Socrates refers to it only with the vague term “the art concerned with logoi.” In fact, parallels to this phrase elsewhere in Plato, primarily in the Phaedrus, refer not to dialectic but to rhetoric. This is the art that, in the Gorgias, is said to create trust. The term “rhetoric” does not occur in the Phaedo, but trust and, more broadly, persuasion are, as we have seen, very prominent themes. There is an interesting point to accusing the misologists of lacking not dialectical but rhetorical expertise, since they in effect do just the opposite of what the rhetor does. Instead of using logoi to persuade and create trust, they abuse them in order to sow universal mistrust. In this the misologists lack (not unlike misanthropes) an understanding of the

54 The only “technical” dialectical method alluded to in Plato’s dialogues, that of “division and collection,” is a method for finding definitions, not offering proofs. Cf. Phaedrus 265d-266a and Philebus 16b-17a (though it is controversial whether the same method is being referred to in both passages). The method is then applied at length in a strange and problematic way in the Sophist and the Statesman.

55 It is not likely that Plato writes in this way merely because he had not yet adopted this terminology when he composed the Phaedo (where dialectic is never mentioned), given that he uses the adjective διαλέκτικος in the Euthydemus (290c) and the Meno (75d), in addition to the lengthy discussion of διαλέκτική in the Republic (531d-537c).

56 The most exact verbal parallel is Phaedrus 273a (οἱ περὶ τῶν λόγων τεχνηικοί), but there are two references to a τέχνη περὶ λόγων (261b and 273e) and references to a τέχνη λόγων are very frequent: 260d, 262c, 266c-d, 267b-d, 270a, 270c, 271c, 272b, 273d, and 274b. I take it that these different constructions are equivalent in meaning. Admittedly, in the Phaedrus Socrates is describing an idealized, philosophical rhetoric, which in fact requires dialectic, understood as the technique of “divisions and collections.” But rhetoric itself, a practice of “soul-leading,” remains distinct from dialectic. There is anyway no reason to think that this idealized rhetoric is at play in the Phaedo, given that “the art concerned with logoi” is a natural way of referring to rhetoric of the normal sort (cf. Gorgias 449d-e, 450b).

57 Cf. the one appearance of the word μισόλογος in the Republic, in Socrates’ description of what happens when someone concentrates on gymnastics to the exclusion of philosophy (411d-e): “Such a man becomes a hater of logos and unmusical (ἄμουσος), and no longer makes any use of persuasion through logoi (πειθοῖ μὲν διὰ λόγων οὐδὲν ἔτι χρῆται), but accomplishes everything through force and savagery like a wild beast.”
nature and needs of the human soul—the kind of understanding that underlies rhetoric as portrayed in the *Phaedrus*. We shall see that it is this, rather than their proto-skeptical views, that Socrates really disapproves of.

6.4 Sickness, health, and pragmatic arguments (*Phaedo* 90d-91c)

Phaedo and his friends are experiencing a “crisis of trust” about *logoi*; Socrates’ criticism of the misologists and antilogicians turns on the way that they deliberately cultivate such mistrust. The motivation for this criticism becomes clear as Socrates now sums up his warning in a long and complex exhortation to his audience. He begins:

“So let us first of all be careful and not allow into our soul the idea that there is a risk of there being nothing healthy in *logoi*. It is rather much more the case that we ourselves are not yet in a healthy condition, and that we must be courageous and eager about getting healthy—you and the others for the sake of the rest of your lives, I for the sake of death itself...” (90d-91a)

Earlier Socrates used the adjective “healthy” (ὑγιής) to designate “honesty” or “soundness” in both people and arguments. He now shifts the metaphor: a person must first be “healthy” in order to judge the soundness of *logoi* correctly. Phaedo and his companions, Socrates suggests, lost confidence in the arguments for the immortality of the soul because they are themselves “not yet in a healthy condition.” The misologists think that there is nothing healthy in *logoi*, but in fact very seriously sick themselves.

On the protreptic reading of the passage, this concern about health reflects a perfectly valid and salutary awareness of the possibility of epistemic defects—a thoroughly Socratic humility. It is possible, for instance, to lack skill in the analysis of arguments. But such a lack of skill is not the only possible kind of epistemic defect. The metaphorical vocabulary of “health” and “sickness” in fact suggests antecedent non-rational factors that prevent one from judging the force of arguments correctly. In the context of the *Phaedo*, the relevant sickness would seem to be an excessive attachment to the deceptive bodily senses and the
unstable sensible world. Philosophy, on the view presented by Socrates earlier in the *Phaedo* (cf. 63e-68e), is above all a practice of “purification” that aims to break this attachment.

The possibility of non-rational epistemic defects is a tempting explanation for the puzzling phenomenon of persistent disagreement among philosophers that is seized upon by skeptics. If two philosophers (i.e. expert analysts of arguments) still disagree about an argument after long discussion and study, maybe there is simply something wrong with one of them. Perhaps, in Anscombe’s famous phrase, one of them “shows a corrupt mind.” But such an appeal to non-rational epistemic defects is in fact a dangerous tactic for avoiding the skeptical threat posed by philosophical disagreement. The rhetoric of sickness (as Anscombe’s line illustrates) comes very close to the *ad hominem* tactic of “poisoning the well,” i.e. suggesting that one’s opponent is simply not the kind of person whose arguments can *ever* be trusted: arguments do not need to be argued against or even examined closely when their advocate is “sick.” This in fact plays into the hands of the skeptic by destabilizing the presupposition of a shared norm of rationality, according to which all participants in philosophical dialogue are basically receptive to the same kinds of arguments. Can we tell whether we ourselves are healthy, if sickness affects our judgment to begin with? If a variety of mental conditions might lead one to accept a variety of different positions, how do we decide which condition counts as normatively healthy at all?

Socrates’ appeal to the need for health in his attempt to pull Phaedo and his friends out of their crisis of trust is thus paradoxical. Though his goal is ostensibly to shore up their confidence in *logoi*, what he says also plays to his audience’s fears that they are “worthless as judges” of them. Moreover, he very explicitly includes himself in his accusation of sickness. He says that he must try to become healthy:

“...for the sake of death itself, since at the moment I risk being a lover not of wisdom but of victory (οὐ φιλοσόφως ἔχειν ἀλλὰ φιλονίκως) concerning this very thing, like completely uneducated people. When those people dispute about something, they don’t care about how things actually stand with respect to the subject of the *logos*, but only about how what they support should seem to be the case to those present.”

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58 *Anscombe* 1958, 17.
And at the moment it seems to me that I will differ from them only in this: I will not be eager that what I'm saying should seem true to those present, except as a side effect, but that it should seem to be the case as much as possible to myself." (91a-b)

Socrates here makes the rather shocking admission that he has been acting not like a philosopher, who follows the argument wherever it leads, but rather like “completely uneducated people,” who care only about persuading others at any cost. In other words, in contrast to the misologists, he has been acting like a rhetorician, except that he is focused on persuading himself rather than others.\(^59\) (Since training in rhetoric was the most prestigious form of education in ancient Athens, Socrates’ reference to “completely uneducated people” is quite appropriate, in a bitingly sarcastic way.\(^60\)) We should not merely dismiss this as self-deprecating irony,\(^61\) since Socrates immediately provides an argument that motivates his attempt to persuade himself:

“This is how I reason about it, dear comrade—look how greedily! If the things I’m saying happen to be true, then it is a fine thing to be persuaded of them. If, on the other hand, there is nothing for the one who dies, then at least I will be less unpleasant for those present because of my grieving (ἡττον τοῖς παροῦσι ἀηδὴς ἔσομαι ὀδυρόμενος) during this time before my death, and this foolishness will not last for me—that would be bad—but will shortly later perish.” (91b)

Whether the arguments about the soul’s postmortem survival are true or false, trusting in them will produce a benefit. In only one case will Socrates hold a true opinion, but in both cases he will be made “less unpleasant” to others by mitigating his fear of death.

This is a simple pragmatic argument for trust in the immortality of the soul. (By “pragmatic argument,” I mean an argument that appeals to the beneficial consequences of holding a certain view as a reason to hold it, rather than seeking to establish that the view is true.) Far from an ironic joke, what Socrates says here is thus an ancestor of Pascal’s Wager.\(^62\)

The use of a such an argument gives a point to Socrates’ veiled criticism of the misologists...

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\(^{59}\) Cf. his later remark that he is “encouraging simultaneously you and myself” (115d).

\(^{60}\) Rowe 1993, 215 sees οἱ πάνι ἀπαίδευτοι instead as the eristics.

\(^{61}\) As is done by Hackforth 1955, 109; Rowe 1993, 215-216; and Frede 1999, 88 (Socrates speaks “mit einer im Phaidon sonst seltenen Ironie”).

\(^{62}\) This is noticed (but not really discussed) by Ryan 1945, Jordan 2006, 39-40 cites Meno 86b-c as the earliest example of a pragmatic argument. Notice that Socrates’ argument in the Phaedo does not actually rely on the existence of an afterlife: the relevant good consequences of trusting in postmortem survival are...
for their neglect of rhetoric (of which he now casts himself as a practitioner). If arguments are to be valued for their consequences as well as for (or perhaps even regardless of) their truth, then by blunting the power of argumentation to produce trust misologists harm both themselves and others. Misology, in other words, reduces the power of *logos* to benefit us.

This is nonetheless a surprising position for Socrates to take. Pragmatic arguments seem to be in tension with a principle that he often forcefully expresses in Plato’s dialogues and that seems to underlie his use of the *elenchus*, namely that it is a bad thing to hold a false opinion.\(^3\) Of course the thesis of the immortality of the soul at this point in the *Phaedo* is merely uncertain, not patently false; Socrates moreover here adds the caveat that to hold a false view *would* indeed be bad. But even if he is not simply advocating belief in something false, there is certainly still a risk of holding a false belief involved, which in the circumstances Socrates sees as being outweighed by the positive consequences, given the short amount of time that this “foolishness” (i.e. acceptance of the view that the soul is immortal, assuming that this is false) would persist before he will completely perish (as the soul in this scenario does not actually survive death). But this raises a worry: exactly how long would one have to hold the false opinion before the evil did outweigh the good? Could it ever be better for some people to hold a false opinion (e.g. that there is an afterlife)—a “noble lie” that would make them “less unpleasant” to others for their entire lives?

In the *Republic*, Plato notoriously does countenance the use of falsehoods by the rulers on the ruled. But those whom Socrates is now persuading “as a side-effect” in the *Phaedo* are his close friends, who have a significant level of philosophical interest and aptitude. The risk that they could be left with a long-lasting false opinion is presumably what Socrates is to be enjoyed here and now. Jordan argues that such a “this-worldly” version of the Wager is actually present in Pascal’s texts alongside the better-known “other-worldly” variants and is, moreover, the most philosophically viable version. In any case, it was anticipated by Plato.

\(^{63}\) For examples of this sentiment, cf. *Gorgias* 458a-b (“there is no evil for a human being as great as a false opinion about the things which our argument now concerns”), *Republic* 382a-b (all humans and gods hate falsehood in the soul), and the passage earlier in the *Phaedo*, quoted above, whereby “the greatest and most extreme of all evils” for the human soul is to consider the visible world to be “most manifest and most true,” when it in fact is not (83c). The ethics of pragmatic belief remain a topic of debate today: so-called “evidentialists” hold that pragmatic arguments run afoul of the principle, associated with the nineteenth-century philosopher William Clifford, that it is wrong to believe something without evidence for it.
referring to when he says that he is arguing “greedily” (πλεονεκτικῶς, 91b): he is speaking for his own benefit without regard to his effects on others. It is in this light that we should read the somewhat ominous ending of his speech, just before he turns to the objections of Simmias and Cebes:

“Thus equipped, Simmias and Cebes, I proceed against the logos. But you, if you are persuaded by me, must care little for Socrates but much more for the truth, and if I seem to you to say something true, agree, but if not, resist with every logos (παντὶ λόγῳ ἀντιτείνετε), taking care lest I depart having, in my eagerness, deceived both myself and you, like a bee leaving behind its sting.” (91b-c)

The advocate of the protreptic reading would insist that this warning rests on a good principle: amicus Socrates, sed magis amica veritas. But Socrates’ metaphor of the bee’s sting is in a way disingenuous: leaving his listeners with the false opinion that the soul is immortal might be bad, but it will not be painful. Rather, for Socrates’ listeners at least, it is likely to be comforting and reassuring—such that they have little incentive to take Socrates’ exhortation to continued critical examination seriously.

The benefits of trust in the immortality of the soul and the attendant need to actively combat mistrust are alluded to repeatedly throughout the Phaedo. Just prior to the Affinity Argument, Socrates mockingly accuses Simmias and Cebes of still having “the fear that children have” about death, despite the fact that (as he optimistically claims) the soul’s survival has “already been proved” (77d). This fear, Socrates says, must be dispelled by “daily incantation” (ἐπᾴδειν...ἑκάστης ἡμέρας, 77e). We should not dismiss this and the description of Socrates as an “enchanter” (ἐπῳδός, 78a) as just Platonic literary embellishment. Read alongside the conclusion to Socrates’ warning against misology, the passage’s implication is clear: trust in a philosophical theory is not (purely) a product of the perspicuous soundness

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64 Frede 1999, 89 sees this as the basic message of the passage: “Leser sollen sich dazu aufgefordert fühlen, den Dialog kritisch zu lesen, statt sich von der Atmosphäre am Todestag des Sokrates gefangennehmen zu lassen und seinen Worten die Autorität seiner Person zu verleihen, die allein den Argumenten selbst zukommen darf.” But this raises the question of why Plato included the many admired elements of the dialogue’s dramatic setting at all.

65 Note that bees have earlier in the Phaedo been associated with non-philosophic virtue (82a-b).
of arguments, but rather (also) rests on non-rational factors and may need to be shored up by “incantations.”

At the end of the dialogue, after relating his myth of the afterlife, Socrates again invokes the notion of an incantation to explain why he would tell a long and elaborate myth, even though he cannot endorse all of its details:

“It would not be fitting for an intelligent man to assert with certainty that these things are just as I have said. But that either these things or these sorts of things are the case with regard to our souls and their future dwellings—if indeed the soul is clearly an immortal thing—to say this seems to me to be fitting for one who thinks so and worth the risk (ἀξιόν κινδυνεῖν) for the risk is a fine one (καλὸς γὰρ ὁ κίνδυνος) and one must say these things to oneself like an incantation (ὡσπερ ἐπᾴδειν), for which reason I’ve drawn out the myth so long.” (114d)

Socrates here holds back from a strong form of assent to the myth he has told. There is apparently still some “risk” associated with entertaining and stating the view at all: although Socrates does not say what this risk is, it must be the risk of holding, or persuading others to hold, a view that is false. Yet Socrates is happy to approve the view in question—here not the immortality of the soul per se, but rather a certain picture of the afterlife—for use as an “incantation.” The potential badness of holding a false opinion must again be weighed against other factors.

Socrates’ “incantations” are not merely mythical, however, given that the Affinity Argument is also so qualified. Consider further the following exchange right after the end of the Final Argument, prior to the myth:

**Simmias**: But for my part I too no longer have any basis to mistrust (οὐδ᾽ αὐτὸς ἔχω ἕτερον ἀπιστῶ) from what’s now been said. But because of the great importance of what the *logoi* are about, and out of scorn for human weakness, I’m compelled to still have mistrust (ἀπιστίαν) about these things within myself.

**Socrates**: You’re right, Simmias—and the first assumptions (ὑποθέσεις) as well, even if they are trusty (πισταί) to you, still must be examined more clearly (σαφέστερον). And if you consider them sufficiently, I think, you will follow the *logos*, as much as it is possible for a human being to follow. And if this itself should become clear, you will not search any further. (107a-b)

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66 Cf. similar recusative uses of διϊσχυρίζεσθαι at *Phaedo* 63c and 100d, *Meno* 86b (§ 5.1), and *Republic* 533a.

67 This passage is also quoted and discussed by Wood 2007, 20.
Socrates here not only agrees with Simmias’s observation that the affective experience of trust is not always responsive to rational considerations, but in fact even reminds him, with respect to the “first assumptions” of the Final Argument (the theory of Forms, cf. 101c-102b), that being trusty is not the same as being true—thus casting doubt on the finality of all the dialogue’s conclusions. Moreover, his protreptic encouragement to continue the examination sits uneasily with his confidence that further scrutiny will yield the desired result. Here Socrates sounds like an advocate for spiritual exercises in the service of a dogma, the acceptance of which will eventually obviate the need for a genuinely open search. The exercises involve repeated engagement not with “myth” but with “arguments.” Ultimately, however, the difference between the two may be merely one of presentation: Socrates twice suggests that the entire discussion in the Phaedo is just “story-telling” (μυθολογία, 61e, 70b) and compares his own participation to the singing of a swan (84e-85b).

This reading sheds light on why Socrates presents clearly flawed or unrigorous arguments (as many have judged them) for the soul’s immortality in the rest of the Phaedo. But it also provokes an obvious question: if Socrates shares the misologists’ pessimism about logos as a route to establishing truth, such that philosophical argument really has a merely rhetorical function, then what justifies or guides his use of logos to foster trust in the immortality of the soul in particular? I have already presented my response, drawing on Socrates’ agnostic remarks about the afterlife in the Apology (§ 6.1). Although we do not and can not know what happens to the soul after death, fearing death is definitely bad. This fear is itself epistemically rash, since it implies that we know that our postmortem situation is bad, which in fact is precisely what we do not know. Additionally, the fear of death might

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68 This moment should be compared with one in the Gorgias: when the intransigent Callicles admits that Socrates speaks well but maintains that he is still unpersuaded, Socrates expresses confidence that he will be convinced “if we examine these things many times and perhaps in a better way” (πολλάκις ἴσως καὶ βέλτιον, 513c-d). This “in a better way” is again ambiguous. It may be an admission on Socrates’ part that the arguments in the dialogue have not been stated as rigorously as possible; if they were, Callicles would accept their rational force. But then why the need to go through them many times? As Austin 2013, 44-45 argues, “in a better way” could also refer to additional non-rational means of persuasion. It would thus be not the merits of the argument itself so much as repeated exposure to it, presented in a persuasive way, that would lead Callicles to change his mind, much as on Callicles’ own view laws and customs “bewitch” (κατεπάθεις, 483e) the young into accepting a false morality.
lead us to worry about self-preservation or involve us in intense emotions (like grief) to a degree that would interfere with the pursuit of philosophy. Whereas in the Apology Socrates merely raises the possibility that death could be a good thing, in the Phaedo he adopts the more active strategy of fostering trust in the soul’s immortality of the soul—not as a dogmatic philosophical position (for the soul’s postmortem destiny cannot be known), but as a condition of possibility for the philosophical life.

6.5 Socrates and skepticism

Various aspects of the situation in the Phaedo might prompt one to think of later strands of ancient skepticism. The moment where I began, for instance, is reminiscent of how Sextus Empiricus describes the skeptical attitude as originating when “naturally gifted human beings, troubled by the inconsistency in things and being at a loss (ἀποροῦντες) about to what they should assent,” come to find in their investigations that “to every logos an equal logos is opposed” (Pyrrhonian Outlines I.12). Phaedo and his friends are certainly at a loss, faced with what they see as equally strong yet contradictory logoi. But instead of simply withholding assent and achieving tranquility, as the Pyrrhonian expects to, they are filled with displeasure and confusion, which Socrates proceeds to “cure” by restoring their confidence in the power of logoi to establish theses like the immortality of the soul. Yet his denunciation of misology in fact hints at several points of tacit agreement with the proto-skeptical position of the misologists and their leaders, the antilogicians.

Socrates’s main point of dispute with the misologists is that he does not at all share their policy of cultivating mistrust in all logoi. On the contrary, it seems that he would agree with the spirit of David Hume’s famous critique of Pyrrhonism, namely that global suspension of judgement is not really desirable, indeed is not a psychological perspective that

69 Sextus later explains that in this standard saying of Pyrrhonian skepticism not just any logos is meant, but “one that establishes something dogmatically, that is, concerning something unclear (περὶ ἀδήλου), and not always by way of premises and conclusion, but in any way” (Pyrrhonian Outlines I.202). This corresponds to the sense of logos relevant in Socrates’ warning against misology: philosophical in content, but not necessarily deductive in form.
one can inhabit at all. This goes beyond the Stoic protest that the skeptical program of living
without opinions would lead to total inactivity (the so-called ἀπραξία objection). As Woolf
describes Socrates’s view, “even if it were possible for a person to exist without (in some
sense) believing anything, it would be miserable to exist without believing in anything.”

Thus when Socrates talks about the afterlife in the *Apology* or early in the *Phaedo*, he does
so in very tentative and non-committal terms, yet nonetheless characterizes his attitude as
one of “hope.” In other words, Socrates shares the misologists’ doubt that *logoi* can give us
access to truth, but offers a very different practical response.

An illuminating contrast can be drawn between Socrates’ procedure in the *Phaedo* and
the concluding chapter of the *Pyrrhonian Outlines* (III.280-281), where Sextus describes the
skeptic as a “lover of humanity” (φιλάνθρωπος) who wants to “cure the arrogance and rash-
ness of the dogmatists.” Like a doctor applying medicines of different strengths for different
patients, the skeptic uses “*logoi* of different strength” (διαφόρους κατὰ ἰσχυν λόγους) against
opponents afflicted by different degrees of dogmatism, sometimes employing *logoi* that are
“weighty with respect to persuasiveness,” at other times ones that “appear more feeble.”
Each needs only be strong enough to balance the patient’s current opinion and bring her to
suspension of judgment.

Sextus here relies on a notion of *logoi* as situated along a spectrum with regard to
“strength,” i.e. their subjective “persuasiveness” (πιθανότης). In the *Phaedo*, Socrates adopts
a similar view of *logos* and a similar strategy for proceeding: he too recognizes that *logoi*

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70 Woolf 2007, 12. Here Woolf also briefly draws a critical comparison with the Pyrrhonians.
71 This is a good occasion to contrast my interpretation with the “skeptic reading of Plato” offered by Vogt 2012, to which I am in many ways sympathetic. Vogt holds that Plato’s Socrates anticipates the Pyrrhonian recommendation that we should avoid holding beliefs (at least about some matters): if knowledge is not available, then it is better not to make an insufficiently grounded truth-claim. Now the *Phaedo* would seem to present a serious obstacle to this picture of Socrates. Vogt deals with the dialogue only in passing, admitting that Socrates there seems “unwilling to give up on his view that the soul is immortal, even though it remains unclear whether any of the arguments to that effect is conclusive” (p. 22). She apparently thinks that to understand his position we must draw on a “distinction between the attitude of belief [i.e. δόξα] on the one hand and attitudes that involve some distancing or open-mindedness on the other hand” (p. 10). Thus Socrates in the *Phaedo* has a “view” about the immortality of the soul that is nonetheless not strong enough of a truth-claim to count as δόξα. Vogt also thinks that πίστις denotes a kind of δόξα and shares its “general characteristics” (p. 10n21, cf. 129). But Socrates in the *Phaedo* is clearly not trying to eliminate πίστις.

261
differ in strength and is willing to deploy weaker ones. Like the skeptic, his intentions are therapeutic and philanthropic. Elsewhere he in fact claims that his elenctic activity, at least—which likewise targets arrogance and rashness—is motivated by “love of humanity” (φιλανθρωπία, Euthyphro 3d). Yet his proximate aim in the Phaedo is to cure his listeners not of dogmatism, by bringing them to a suspension of judgment, but rather of the fear of death, by leading them to trust in the immortality of the soul. The dialogue’s sequence of four very different arguments for immortality can be seen as his ongoing attempt to find the right prescription for his audience.

So far this comparison with the latest phase of ancient skepticism, represented by Sextus, has been merely heuristic. But there is also reason to think that Socrates in the Phaedo had an actual influence on the development of skeptical thought—an influence that has gone entirely unrecognized, in part surely because of the dialogue’s role as a central text of dogmatic Platonism. This influence is admittedly not apparent on the founder of Academic skepticism, Arcesilaus (ca. 315-240 BCE), who “drew as the main conclusion from Plato’s various books and Socratic conversations that there is nothing certain that can be grasped by either the senses or the mind” (Cicero, De oratore III.67). One ground for his skeptical reading of the dialogues was doubtless Plato’s portrayals of Socrates’ “antilogical” technique of arguing against whatever position an interlocutor puts forward: Arcesilaus himself argued on both sides of the same question and advocated suspension of judgment “on account of the oppositions between logoi” (διὰ τὰς ἐναντιότητας τῶν λόγων, Diogenes Laertius IV.28). But Plato’s Socrates nowhere explicitly advocates such suspension, even in the aporetic dialogues; in the Phaedo he does quite the opposite. Arcesilaus thus appropriates a Socratic method to achieve a somewhat un-Socratic result.

72The same line of thought about the relationship between Socratic and Pyrrhonian practice, but with reference to the pseudo-Platonic Axiochus (also concerned with the afterlife), is put forward by O’Keefe 2006, 402-403.

73For a survey of the influence of Socrates (as represented elsewhere in Plato’s dialogues) on ancient skepticism, see Bett 2006.
Things are different, however, with the next major figure in the New Academy, Carneades (214-129 BCE). In response to the Stoic ἀπραξία objection, Carneades claimed that he followed “the persuasive” (τὸ πιθανόν).\(^{74}\) Given that the meaning of πιθανός is practically identical to that of πιστός, Carneades could rely on good Platonic precedent for this move—most obviously on the role of πίστις in the Divided Line in the Republic, but also on Socrates’ cultivation of trust in the Phaedo.\(^{75}\) Admittedly, our evidence mainly reports how Carneades employed “the persuasive” as a criterion for functioning in practical, pedestrian contexts, like deciding whether a coiled object is a rope or a snake or whether one should go on a sea voyage,\(^{76}\) rather than with respect to abstract philosophical questions such as the immortality of the soul. Carneades was not, however, an advocate for living entirely without certain higher convictions: Cicero claims that in presenting his famous arguments against the existence of gods and the desirability of justice, Carneades did not actually aim to dislodge trust in these things, only to challenge the adequacy of existing arguments in their favor.\(^{77}\)

In this attempt to balance an opposition to dogmatic rashness with a recognition of our psychological need for opinions, Carneades seems more faithful than Arcesilaus to Plato’s complex portrait of Socrates.\(^{78}\)

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\(^{74}\) Cf. Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrhonian Outlines I.230, Against the Mathematicians VII.173-175.

\(^{75}\) The precise nature of “the persuasive” for Carneades is disputed: on the “weak” interpretation, the πιθανόν is simply whatever strikes a particular individual as convincing, while on the “strong” reading, it is what is actually probable or likely to be true. (For this terminology I follow Obdrzalek 2006, who argues for the latter view.) I cannot adjudicate this issue here, but note that the Phaedo clearly anticipates the “weak” reading: there πίστις and πιθανός refer to a (fragile) experience of subjective credence.

\(^{76}\) Cf. Sextus Empiricus, Against the Mathematicians VII.187; Cicero, Academica II.100; and Thorsrud 2009, 80-81.

\(^{77}\) Cf. De natura deorum III.34 (“Carneades said these things, not to do away with the gods—what would be less suitable for a philosopher?—but rather to persuade that the Stoics explain nothing about the gods”) and Lactantius, Épitome 50.8, following a lost section of Cicero’s De re publica (Carneades argued against justice “not because he thought that justice should be criticized, but rather to show that its defenders said nothing certain or firm about it”).

\(^{78}\) Cicero also presents a particularly interesting parallel. Although he embraces something like the “strong” reading of Carneades, selecting the Latin terms probabile (“plausible”) and veri simile (“truth-like”) as translations for πιθανός, his brand of skepticism otherwise proves very close to Socrates’ stance in the Phaedo. Cicero does not employ the plausible and truth-like in making practical decisions; rather, they are what he aims at in the investigation of abstract philosophical questions. While he maintains that no argument should ever be taken as final and decisive, he does not intend to bring about permanent suspension of judgment; rather, the examination and comparison of different positions should lead us to what is worthy of provisional approval (cf. e.g. De natura deorum III.95). In this way, the study of philosophy can have important pragmatic and therapeutic benefits (cf. Tusculan Disputations II.11). In order to make these
While the Academics actively presented themselves as the heirs of Socrates, the other main group of skeptics in antiquity, the Pyrrhonians, traced their lineage instead to Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 360-270 BCE). In contrast to Socrates, Pyrrho seems to have explicitly advocated a life without opinions, claiming that “things are equally indifferent and unmeasurable and unjudgeable, on account of which neither our perceptions nor our opinions are true or false, on account of which one must not trust (πιστεύειν) them, but rather be without opinions and inclinations or waverings” (Eusebius, Preparation for the Gospel XIV.18.3-4). Pyrrho himself wrote nothing, but his student Timon of Phlius composed various works including the Silloi, a hexameter poem, preserved only in fragments, that satirized various philosophers. Three lines preserved by Diogenes Laertius target Socrates:

From these [inquiries in natural science] the stone-cutter babbling about morality turned them away, the enchanter of the Greeks, who made them precise in logoi, sneerer with a nostril blown by rhetoricians, the half-Attic ironist. (II.19)

In describing Socrates as an “enchanter” (ἐπαοιδός), Timon was likely inspired by the passage in the Phaedo where the same term is used (78a). After seeming to pay a compliment by saying that Socrates made the Greeks “precise in logoi” (ἀκριβολόγους), Timon then mockingly presents this as a result of his being in league with the rhetoricians, calling him ῥητορόμυκτος. This suggests that Timon (and perhaps Pyrrho) objected to precisely the practice of Plato’s Socrates salient in the Phaedo: his rhetorical cultivation of trust. This is diametrically opposed to Pyrrho’s project of “doing away with the true and the false and the persuasive” (Eusebius, Preparation for the Gospel XIV.6.5) in pursuit of tranquility.

In other ways as well Pyrrho and Timon resemble the misologists of the Phaedo. Diogenes Laertius reports that Pyrrho “determined nothing dogmatically, on account of contradiction” benefits of philosophy available for the wider community, an alliance with rhetorical eloquence is necessary (see Thorsrud 2009, 93). Cicero’s positive interest in rhetoric contrasts sharply with his impatience towards the Stoic idealization of dialectic as an arbiter of truth and falsehood (cf. Academica II.91). He agrees, in other words, with Socrates in the Phaedo that we need “the art concerned with logoi”—and this art is rhetoric, not dialectic or logic.

79The Phaedo is, after all, set in Timon’s hometown, Phlius. The context at 78a (Socrates encourages his listeners to search all of Greece, and also among the barbarians, for a new “enchanter”) might also have suggested Timon’s phrase Ἑλλήνων ἐπαοιδός.
(διὰ τὴν ἀντιλογίαν, IX.106). The term ἀντιλογία is most naturally interpreted as referring to the phenomenon of equally persuasive yet contradictory logoi that Socrates singles out as the cause of misology (and that also impressed Pyrrho’s contemporary Arcesilaurus). Furthermore, Pyrrho’s recommendation that we not trust our sensations or opinions is based, according to the report from Eusebius, on an apparently dogmatic metaphysical claim about the way that things (τὰ πράγματα) actually are, namely indeterminate. A similar claim is of course embraced by both Socrates and the antilogicians in the Phaedo (78c-79a, 90b-c). Given the chronology involved, Pyrrho and his followers are of course not themselves the misologists that Socrates has in mind, yet both were likely inspired by the same fifth century sophists and followers of Heraclitus.

The movement begun by Pyrrho and Timon in the fourth century BCE was not sustained, but was revived some three hundred years later by an erstwhile Academic, Aenesidemus. His writings are lost, but their influence can be detected in many surviving texts, including, as Burnyeat has argued, several passages of Diogenes Laertius that report attacks on the notion that there is any connection between what is persuasive and what is true:

In response to the oppositions that come about in investigations, [the skeptics] first show the ways (τρόπους) in which things persuade (πείθει τὰ πράγματα), then, using the same ways, they do away with trust (πίστιν) concerning them. For they say that what persuades is what the senses agree on, or what never or rarely changes, or what is habitual, or established by custom, or pleasant, or marvelous. They have shown that the sources of persuasion are equal (ἴσας τὰς πιθανότητας) from the opposites of the persuasive things. (IX.78-79)

80 Bett 2000, 114-115 seems to think of Pyrrho as having been most impressed by contradictions in the qualities of things rather than by contradictions between arguments. Admittedly, the emphasis on logoi may have been a later development; Diogenes in IX.106 says that he is following Aenesidemus and also refers to a friend of Aenesidemus named Zeuxis, who wrote a work called Περὶ διττῶν λόγων, possibly a commentary on the sophistic Dissoi Logoi. But note Pausanias’s characterization of Pyrrho (in the course of describing a monument to him in his hometown) as a “sophist who never came to stable agreement (βέβαιον ὁμολογίαν) on any logos” (VI.24.5).

81 For a persuasive defense of this “metaphysical” reading of Pyrrho’s views as represented in the Eusebius passage, see Bett 2000, 18-29. For a defense of the contrary “epistemological” reading, see Thorsrud 2009, 18-25.

82 Bett 2000, 132-140, 183-186 argues for a link between Pyrrho and the Heraclitean views developed in Plato’s texts, in particular the Republic and the Theaetetus.

83 Burnyeat 1980, 28.
One must not suppose that what persuades (τὸ πεῖθον) is true. The same thing does not persuade everyone, nor the same people all the time. Persuasiveness (πιθανότης) also comes about from external factors (παρὰ τὰ ἐκτός), because of the reputation of the speaker or his cleverness or charm, or because of habit or gratification. (IX.94)

For Burnyeat, these passages reflect Aenesideman criticism of the Academic πιθανόν. But in this assault on the epistemic value of persuasiveness and trust, which come about for arbitrary and contingent reasons, Aenesidemus can also be seen as taking up the arms of the antilogicians of the Phaedo, who seek eliminate to trust, against the Socratic project of fostering it.

In another passage indebted to material from Aenesidemus, Sextus Empiricus considers and dismisses the idea that Plato himself is a skeptic, given that whenever he:

...makes claims about the Ideas or Providence or the virtuous life being more choiceworthy than the life with vices, if he assents to these things as being the case, he dogmatizes, or if he sides with them as being more persuasive (ὡς πιθανωτέροις προστίθεται), since then he prefers something with respect to trust and mistrust (προκρίνει τι κατὰ πίστιν ἢ ἀπιστίαν), he has abandoned the distinctive mark of skepticism, for this is foreign to us as well. (Pyrrhonian Outlines I.222)

Even if Plato is not a dogmatist in the sense of assenting to certain views as certain, he is still not a skeptic, as long as he prefers them as more persuasive or trustworthy. Sextus is not here contrasting a straightforwardly dogmatic reading of Plato with a fallibilist one (whereby Plato makes assertions in some tentative or open-minded way), given that “trust” for Sextus is a purely a matter of subjective feeling, not objective warrant. Rather, the second reading on which Plato is labeled a dogmatist corresponds to Socrates’ therapeutic stance in

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84 Whether Sextus is following or disagreeing with Aenesidemus is actually controversial due to a textual corruption in this chapter; for a plausible reconstruction of the text see Spinelli 2000. The decisive consideration is that it would make little sense for Aenesidemus to reject Socrates and instead canonize Pyrrho if he in fact believed that Plato was himself really a skeptic. Thus Sextus must be agreeing with Aenesidemus here.

85 It is interesting that Sextus does not include the immortality of the soul in his brief catalogue of Plato’s dogmatic positions; in fact he mentions it only once (Pyrrhonian Outlines I.151), as an example of an issue on which the skeptics oppose different “dogmatic suppositions” to one another.

86 Sextus nowhere elaborates explicitly on the meaning of πίστις. But consider his use of identical language in describing the phenomenon of “equal strength” as “equality with respect to trust and mistrust (κατὰ πίστιν καὶ ἀπιστίαν), such that none of the conflicting logoi comes forward as trustier (πιστότερον) than another” (Pyrrhonian Outlines I.10). “Equal strength” is not a matter of positively holding that the probabilities involved are actually equal, but rather a psychological state of equilibrium.

266
the *Phaedo*. Sensitivity (and hostility) to this side of Socrates would partially explain why, despite his Academic training, Aenesidemus chose to look instead to the forgotten Pyrrho as an intellectual forebear.

That Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedo* in fact played this role as a negative examplar for early Pyrrhonian figures like Timon and Aenesidemus must of course remain a speculative suggestion. In any case, some of the most important concepts and problems of ancient skepticism are already adumbrated in this passage from what appears on the surface to be one of Plato’s most dogmatic texts. Socrates’ warning against misology is less a celebration of reason than a complex meditation on its limits.87

87The substance of this chapter will appear in *Phronesis* in 2015; I thank the anonymous reviewer, as well as Simon Shogry and Voula Tsouna, for extremely helpful comments.
7 The Christian Reception

Nietzsche famously called Christianity “Platonism for the ‘people,’” thus a derivative and unsophisticated popular version of an already pernicious philosophy—a double insult. It is true that certain important ideas are shared between prominent strands of Platonism and Christianity: for instance, the notion that the cosmos and human souls were created by a divine agent, that souls are judged and experience rewards and punishments after death, or the general privileging of a transcendent realm over this impermanent physical world. The tradition of Christian philosophy, moreover, which reached its apex in medieval scholasticism in western Europe, borrowed many ideas from Platonist thought, notably including strategies of proving both the existence of god and the status of the human soul as an incorporeal and incorruptible substance. Historically speaking, however, the initial encounter between early Christianity and Platonism in late antiquity was an enormously complex affair. Not all early Christian thinkers were friendly to Platonism. Some were hostile towards pagan philosophy in general, some sided with non-Platonist philosophical schools, and still others saw the Platonists as the philosophers whose thought was most akin to Christianity—“none have come nearer to us than they have,” says Augustine (De civitate dei VIII.5)—but still emphasized decisive differences between the two.

The aim of this chapter is not to provide either an overview or even a representative sample of the massive amount of extant writings relevant to the relationship between Platonism

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1 In the preface to Beyond Good and Evil.
2 Tertullian, the first major Christian theologian to write in Latin, exemplifies the first two tendencies. In his De anima, probably composed around 210, he refers to Greek philosophers in general as the “patriarchs of the heretics” (3.1) but saves special vitriol for the Platonist doctrine of the incorporeal soul, while praising Stoic corporealism for being closer to Biblical truth.
and early Christianity, but rather to discuss a small number of Christian texts that deal specifically with the Platonist doctrine of the immortality of the soul in a philosophically interesting way. That Christian theologians had, from the start, a complex relationship with this doctrine can be illustrated with a passage from Origen’s *Dialogue with Heraclides*, where Origen represents himself as speaking as follows:

“In I will say that the soul is immortal and that the soul is not immortal (καὶ ἀθάνατος ἡ ψυχή καὶ οὐκ ἀθάνατος ἡ ψυχή). Let us first define the word ‘death’ and distinguish the different things it means. I will first try to establish its meanings not according to the Greeks but according to holy scripture. Perhaps someone wiser will establish other meanings, but at present I know of three kinds of death. What are these three deaths? According to the apostle, one ‘lives to god’ and ‘died to sin’ [Romans 6:10]. This is a blessed death: one died to sin. ... I also know another death, by which one dies to god (καθ’ ὃν ἀποθνῄσκει τῷ Θεῷ), concerning which it was said, ‘the soul that sins will die’ [Ezekiel 18:4]. I also know a third death, by which we consider in general that those released from the body (τοὺς ἀπαλλαγέντας τοῦ σώματος) die. For ‘Adam lived nine hundred and thirty years and then died’ [Genesis 5:5]. Since there are these three deaths, let us see if the human soul is immortal with respect to all three or to none or to some of them. All human beings die the middle death, which we consider to be a dissolution, but no human soul dies this death. If it did, it would not be punished (οὐκ ἄν ἐκολάζετο) after death.” (25-26)

Origen first separates out two ways in which death is spoken of metaphorically in the Christian scriptures. He turns to the Platonic conception of death as the separation or release of soul from body. All human beings undergo this death, but the soul is not thereby destroyed. Origen thus holds that the soul is immortal in a literal sense in order to ground the Christian doctrine of postmortem punishments.

This chapter has four sections. The first briefly discusses the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body, a vision of the afterlife presented in the epistles of Paul in the New Testament apparently as an alternative to the immortality of soul. I argue that early Christian thinkers often reasonably saw psychic immortality and bodily resurrection as complementary rather than contradictory ideas; Christians who opposed the Platonic doctrine thus generally did not do so out of commitment to the Pauline one. The rest of the chapter

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3By τὸν μέσον θάνατον Origen does not mean the second in order of those he mentioned, but rather the third, which is called μέσος either because it is a matter of indifference or because it comes in between this life and the next.
examines in detail two Christian texts that reflect direct and careful engagement with Pla-tonic and Platonist thought on the specific issue of the immortality of the soul—one from a hostile perspective, the other from a *prima facie* friendly one. Both texts take the form of a dialogue, thus reflecting, directly or indirectly, Plato’s influence in their literary form.

The first text, the subject of the chapter’s second section, is the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* by Justin Martyr. In this work, written in Greek in the second century CE, the author offers perceptive criticism of Plato’s doctrine of the immortality of the soul as a threat to the underlying *epistemological* assumptions of Christianity. I then turn to a much later, Latin text: the *Soliloquies* of Augustine, written in 386 CE. This is by far the most sophisticated example of Christian philosophical engagement with Plato’s doctrine. In the third section, I show how Augustine in the first book of the *Soliloquies* uses the metaphorical field of sickness and health to characterize our receptivity to philosophical arguments; in contrast to Socrates in the *Phaedo*, Augustine’s aim is not to hint at a skeptical point, but rather to show the need for religious faith in order to do philosophy. In the fourth and final section, I examine the proofs for the immortality of the soul offered in the second book of the *Soliloquies*. To an even greater degree than the proofs in the *Phaedo*, these arguments are openly recognized as unsatisfactory. This raises questions about the appeal and viability of a philosophical project of proving the immortality of the soul in the shadow of religious conviction—a crucial question for later Christian philosophers.

It is fitting to conclude this work with a consideration of Augustine, given his unparalleled influence on the later traditions of philosophy and Christian theology. His conversion to catholic Christianity in 386 was prepared for by long engagement with both Academic and Platonist thought; in the two years after his conversion, he was intensely interested in the problem of proving the soul’s immortality, as evidenced by the *Soliloquies* and another related work, the *De immortalitate animae*. His attitude towards the notion of the immortality of the soul becomes more nuanced in his later works, but he never abandons the view. Since

4On the use (and alleged disappearance) of the dialogue form as a literary medium among Christians, see the introduction and essays collected in Goldhill 2008; a more nuanced perspective is found in cameron.
the knowledge of Greek was mostly lost and translations of Plato’s dialogues were rare, Augustine’s works became the most significant conduit of influence for Plato and Platonism on western Europe in the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Augustine more than anyone else is thus responsible for the subsequent apparent harmony between Christianity and Platonism remarked on by Nietzsche.

7.1 The Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body

The immortality of the soul is not a prominent idea in the Christian scriptural canon. In the Hebrew scriptures, it is referred to only in a very few passages in late deuterocanonical or non-canonical texts whose authors were clearly influenced by Greek philosophy (cf. Wisdom 2:23-3:4; 4 Maccabees 14:6, 18:23). The notion is not found at all in the New Testament, where the term ψυχή frequently means merely “life.” In the Gospels, statements about the afterlife in general are in fact neither particularly consistent nor particularly prominent. The clearest references to postmortem existence involve allusions to punishments and rewards for moral behavior, often in the context of parables (e.g. Matthew 25:31-45, Luke 16:19-31). Many texts, however, suggest that the punishment of a wicked soul will be its total annihilation. And many of the more positive promises of Jesus (e.g. Luke 17:21: “the kingdom of God is within you”) can be read as applying to alleged future historical events in this world or even strictly to this life now.

6 Menn 1998 is a brilliant study of Augustine’s influence on Descartes. There were of course other paths of transmission as well. To cite only a single further example, the Elements of Theology of Proclus was extensively adapted by the Christian pseudo-Dionysius and the author of the Arabic Liber de causis, both of which were translated into Latin before the Elements itself was as well by William of Moerbeke; Thomas Aquinas knew all three texts. For more detail see Dodds 1963, xxvi-xxxiii. It is in fact pseudo-Dionysius, De divinis nominibus, that Aquinas cites as his authority in the sed contra in his discussion of whether the human soul is incorruptible in the Summa theologiae (I.75.6).


7 Cf. the almost Socratic sentiment of Jesus’ words at Matthew 10:28, which nonetheless constitute a denial of the permanent immortality: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear the one who can destroy both the soul and the body in Gehenna.”

It is only in the Pauline letters that we hear in some detail about a particular Christian vision of the afterlife, namely “the resurrection of the dead” (ἡ ἀνάστασις τῶν νεκρῶν). At 1 Corinthians 15:42-55, Paul contrasts a “psychic body” (σῶμα ψυχικόν), which we possess now, with a “spiritual body” (σῶμα πνευματικόν), which we will obtain in the resurrection (15:44). “The dead,” he writes, “will be raised as incorruptible (ἄφθαρτοι), and we will be changed. For this corruptible [body] (τὸ φθαρτὸν τοῦτο) must put on incorruptibility, and this mortal [body] must put on immortality” (15:52-53). This passage includes the only mentions of “immortality” (ἀθανασία) in the New Testament (except for 1 Timothy 6:16, where immortality is restricted to god). The ψυχή itself is not mentioned, and the “psychic body,” i.e. our earthly body shaped by and suited for the soul, is what will be replaced by the “spiritual body” (the precise nature of which is left obscure).

The origins of the notion of the resurrection in Jewish thought or its meaning in the context of Christian theology cannot be discussed here. What is clear is that in 1 Corinthians Paul presents—possibly but not explicitly in opposition to Platonists of some sort—a way of conceiving of postmortem existence that does not depend on the survival of the soul and in which the body is in some sense cast in a positive light. Platonists, influenced by the denigration of embodied existence found in texts like the Phaedo, viewed this idea as absurd: Plotinus, in what is apparently a veiled allusion to the Christian doctrine, compares embodied life to sleep as a kind of impaired state and says that bodily resurrection (ἀνάστασις) would thus be like just switching beds (Ennead III.6.6.70-74).

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body were, from an early Christian perspective, necessarily mutually exclusive or contradictory ideas. Rather, many ancient Christian thinkers writing on the resurrection

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9 The word ψυχικός, often translated confusingly as “natural,” always has a pejorative sense in the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14, James 3:15, Jude 19:2).
10 On this topic, see Nickelsburg 2006.
12 This is sometimes obscured by Christian scholars, who exaggerate the opposition between the Platonist and Christian ideas. Cullmann 1958 is the classic modern statement of the incompatibilist position from a Christian perspective, but the idea permeates e.g. the treatment of Augustine on immortality in Mourant.
viewed the immortality of the soul as an idea to be adopted, with certain modifications. The Platonist doctrine was useful for guaranteeing the survival of the individual in the period between death and the bestowal by god of the new spiritual body, thus adding a credible philosophical underpinning to what is essentially a miraculous belief.

As an example of this Christian strategy, consider the *De resurrectione* attributed to Athenagoras, a text in which knowledge of pagan Greek philosophy is deployed for apologetic purposes, i.e. to give Christianity intellectual credibility. The immortality of the soul is here simply presumed throughout. In one argument for the necessity of a bodily resurrection, the author sets down as a premise that “the whole nature of human beings in general is constituted from an immortal soul and a body fitted together with it at birth, and god did not assign such a birth and life and whole span of existence to either the nature of the soul on its own (τῇ φύσει τῆς ψυχῆς καθ' ἑαυτήν) nor to the body separately” (15.2). Here the Platonist insistence on the soul’s immortality is combined with the commonsensical Aristotelian perspective that the human being is really the compound of soul and body together. The conclusion follows:

If a resurrection does not come about (ἀναστάσεως μὴ γυμνομένης), the nature of human beings would not persist. If the nature of human beings does not persist, the soul would be fitted together in vain (μάτην) to the needs and affections of the body, while the body would be fettered in vain from getting the things it desires, yielding and brided to the reins of the soul. Intellect would be in vain, as would be intelligence and the maintenance of justice and the practice of every virtue and the setting down and arrangement of laws and in general everything that is fine among human beings or comes about through them, or rather indeed the very generation and nature of human beings itself! But if what is in vain (τὸ μάταιον) has been entirely driven out from all the works of god and the gifts that he has given, then the persistence of the body in accord with its own nature must certainly stretch out to eternity (συνδιαιωνίζειν) along with the deathlessness (τῷ ἀτελευτήτῳ) of the soul. (15.7-8)

Kobusch 2007 argues in a somewhat less explicitly apologetic manner that the resurrection of the body was seen in ancient thought as the philosophical “Vollendung” of the immortality of the soul. Kobusch 2007, 494 calls this, rightly, “die philosophischste Abhandlung über die Auferstehung in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten.” Disputes over the authorship and dating of this text are not important for our purposes; it belongs to either the late second or early third century of our era. For more information see the edition of Schoedel 1972, whose text I follow here.
The author leans heavily here on another Aristotelian principle, namely that nature (here, god) does nothing in vain. If the union of body and soul is impermanent, then the brief period of union would seem to be an arbitrary misfortune both for the soul (as the Platonists emphasize) but also for the body. (Why a union apparently to the detriment of both would be more palatable if eternal is left open.) Whatever the merits of this argument for the necessity of the resurrection, the immortality of the soul is obviously not attacked, but is rather assumed as a premise.

A similar picture emerges from the explicit confrontation between Platonist and Christian ideas about postmortem existence in Augustine’s *De civitate dei*. Augustine in this (late) work does assert that “the human soul is truly held to be immortal,” in the sense that “it never ceases to live and feel in some way, however slight” (XIII.2)⁴ Augustine strongly rejects, however, two Platonist views about postmortem existence, which he associates with Plato and Porphyry, respectively: (1) that souls are involved in an endless cycle of reincarnation and (2) that the best souls, those fully purified by philosophy, will never return to a body or to the sensible world after death.⁵ For Augustine, souls will not be subjected to an endless cycle of reincarnation, but neither will any exist forever without bodies (XXII.26); rather, after death they will receive one new body that will last for the rest of time.⁶

Augustine’s opposition in the *De civitate dei* to the dictum *omne corpus fugiendum*, which he associates with Porphyry, is not, however, necessarily evidence of a generally more positive attitude among Christian thinkers (in comparison with the Platonists) towards human embodiment in this life. Augustine has first of all darker reasons for insisting that

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⁴ Like Origen in the *Dialogue with Heraclides*, Augustine does hold in the same passage that the soul can also be said to be dead in a metaphorical way, if abandoned by god.

⁵ Whether or not Plato actually believed in reincarnation in the first place, Porphyry’s view was in fact probably based on certain hints in Platonic texts to which Augustine did not have access, notably Socrates’ vague suggestion in the myth of the *Phaedo* that those who “have been sufficiently purified by philosophy” will after death “live entirely without bodies for the time to come” (114b-c). So the disagreement that Augustine posits does not necessarily exist.

⁶ Augustine in fact marshals Plato in support of the possibility of such an immortal resurrection body with repeated quotations of the speech of the craftsman to the gods from Cicero’s Latin translation of the *Timaeus* (*De civitate dei* XIII.16, XXII.26), according to which the lesser gods (which either have or are bodies) will be immortal by the will of the craftsman (cf. *Timaeus* 41a-b). Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* IV.8.2.28-53. See Mourant 1969, 37-49 for more on Augustine’s conception of the resurrected body.
the dead have bodies: he takes punishments in hell to involve real, bodily pain, as well as psychic anguish, rejecting the view that the fires of hell are a metaphorical representation of torments applying to soul alone (XXI.9). More broadly, the Pauline doctrine posits a “spiritual body” that would apparently lack many of the limitations and deficiencies of our current mortal bodies (such as are lamented by Socrates in the *Phaedo*). The complex debates within Christian theology about the precise nature of the resurrection body (in which Origen, among others, played an important role) cannot be dealt with here.\(^\text{17}\)

### 7.2 The immortality of the soul in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*

The *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* by Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165 CE) is one of the earliest Christian apologetic texts to engage explicitly with Plato and Platonism. Perhaps surprisingly, the Platonic doctrine of the immortal soul is one of the main targets of the author’s criticism. I will argue that Justin Martyr clearly grasps the fundamentally epistemological import of Plato’s doctrine and holds it to be in irreconcilable conflict with the Christian emphasis on revelation.

The narrator of the dialogue—a philosopher who has converted to Christianity, generally equated with Justin himself\(^\text{18}\)—is accosted while out for a walk by a Jew named Trypho, who identifies the narrator as a philosopher and inquires about his views. When Justin suggests that Trypho, as a Jew, can rely on Moses and the prophets and thus has no need of philosophy, Trypho asks whether the main concern of philosophers is not with the divine (1.3). Justin replies rather bitterly that, as for philosophers:

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\ldots \text{most of them (οἱ πλεῖστοι) have not even cared about whether there is one god or many, or whether they exercise providential care over each one of us or not, as if knowledge of this would accomplish nothing for happiness. But they try to persuade us that the god cares for the whole and for the genera and species, but not for me and you and the}
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\(^{17}\)Cf. the fifth book of Origen’s *Contra Celsum* and Chadwick 1948. For broad surveys of Christian thinking about the body in late antiquity and the Middle Ages from a social and cultural perspective, see Brown 2008 and Bynum 1995.

\(^{18}\)For clarity, in what follows “Justin” will refer to the narrator of the work, “Justin Martyr” to the work’s author.
particular things—otherwise we would not pray to god day and night. It’s not hard to see how this turns out for them. Those holding these opinions are fearless and free to do and say whatever they like, fearing neither punishment nor hoping for anything good from god. How could they? They say the same things will always be, and that even you and me will live again in the same way, having come to be neither better nor worse. Some others, supposing that the soul is immortal and incorporeal (ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀσώματον), think that they will not pay the penalty if they do anything evil—for the incorporeal is unaffected (ἀπαθές)—nor, since the soul exists as an immortal thing, do they need god at all anymore. (1.4-5)

This attack on pagan philosophy is puzzling and in many respects clearly unfair: Justin selectively juxtaposes positions from many different schools, including notably the Peripatetics and the Stoics. Especially odd is the concluding treatment of the soul. The description of the soul as “immortal and incorporeal” clearly comes from the Platonists—who, however, are very far from presenting the immortality of the soul as a ground for moral license, as Justin well knows. It is true that the Platonist (but not Platonic) notion that the soul is unaffected raises a difficulty about how it could be punished. We have seen that Plotinus, writing in the century after Justin, faces this difficulty, but he at least attempts to confront it directly and offers a solution intended to preserve the possibility of postmortem punishments as described in Plato’s myths (cf. §3.5). Plotinus would at any rate never claim that his view of the soul means that he has “no need” of god!

Trypho asks Justin more directly about his own opinion about god and his philosophical views generally. Justin responds by explaining how he frequented in turn Stoic, Peripatetic, and Pythagorean teachers of philosophy and became in each case quickly disillusioned, before encountering the Platonists (2.1-6). The Platonists were more satisfactory: they taught him about “the intellection of incorporeal things” (ἡ τῶν ἁσωμάτων νόησις), leading him to consider himself wise and to expect a vision of god (κατόψεσθαι τὸν θεόν), which, Justin says, is “the end (τέλος) of the philosophy of Plato” (2.6).

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19 As Van Winden [1971], 33 explains, Justin is reporting an ad hominem argument made by pagans against Christians: if the universe was actually providentially ordered down to particular details, there would be no need for constant petitionary prayer.

20 Cf. his reference to Plato’s myths of the afterlife at Apology 8.4.

21 Justin does not name any specific figures, speaking only of “the Platonists” (οἱ Πλατωνικοί). Neither here nor anywhere else in all his works does Justin ever speak of the “Academics.”

276
Justin then relates to Trypho how, walking alone along the seashore during his Platonist phase, he encountered a mysterious old man who engaged him in a dialogue about philosophy (3.1-4). In the following dialogue-within-a-dialogue, Justin attempts to present and defend Platonist ideas in response to the old man’s questions and criticism (3.4-6.1) but eventually reaches a point of aporia, whereupon the old man urges him to accept Christianity (7.1). Once Justin’s account of the conversation by the seashore is concluded, the rest of the Dialogue is taken up with Justin’s attempt to explain Christianity to Trypho. These later, strictly apologetic sections of the text need not concern us here; our focus will instead be on the dialogue-within-a-dialogue and the old man’s attack on Platonist philosophy from a Christian perspective. I will begin with a brief summary of the passage.

After an opening exchange, the old man asks Justin what philosophy is. Justin identifies it with “knowledge of what is and cognition of the truth” (3.4). He defines “what is” (τὸ ὄν) as “that which is always invariably in the same condition and is the cause of being for everything else, and this is god” (3.5). The old man responds by asking a series of questions about knowledge (ἐπιστήμη, 3.5-6). He first distinguishes knowledge of an art or science, like music or arithmetic or astronomy, from knowledge by acquaintance, e.g. of a particular other human being. Knowledge of god would fall in the latter category. But to have the latter sort of knowledge of a thing requires either seeing the thing oneself or hearing about it from someone else who has seen it. How then, the man asks, could philosophers have knowledge of god, whom presumably they have neither seen themselves nor heard about from someone who has?

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22This exchange is discussed by Van Winden 1971, 59-63, who defends the reading that I follow here. The phrase τὸ κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ καὶ ὡσαύτως ἀεὶ ἔχον καὶ τοῦ εἶναι πᾶσι τοῖς ἄλλοις αἴτιον is a pastiche of Phaedo 78c, on the Forms, and Republic 516c, on the sun, as a metaphor for the idea of the Good. The equation of the Form of the good with god is, to be sure, not strictly Platonic. In Plato’s latest writings, at least, “god” seems to be νοῦς as opposed to the Forms, as Menn 1995 argues. But the identification made here by Justin, though certainly also a proleptic allusion to the Christian perspective, also has parallels in the Platonism of the day, as Van Winden notes.

23Compare a rather similar, though more complex, discussion in Augustine’s Soliloquies (I.3.8-5.11), likewise concerning how the knowledge of god compares to acquaintance with other human beings and to knowledge in the technical disciplines.

24Here the old man offers the example of “an animal in India whose appearance is not like any other,” knowledge of which would require either direct or indirect experience.
In reply to the old man, Justin appeals explicitly to Plato, according to whom “the divine is not visible like the other animals, but can only be grasped by the mind” (3.7). We now come to the crucial exchange:

OLD MAN: Does our mind have so great a power of this sort, that it can grasp what it did not earlier grasp through perception? Or will the mind of a human being ever see god before it is adorned with a holy spirit (ἁγίῳ πνεύματι κεκοσμημένος)?

JUSTIN: Plato says that the eye of the mind is just of this sort and has been given to us for this reason, so that we might behold with the pure mind itself that which in fact is (αὐτὸ ἐκεῖνο τὸ ὄν), which is the cause of all the intelligible things, not having color or shape or size or anything that an eye can see. What this itself is, I say, being beyond all substance (ὅν ἐπέκεινα πάσης φύσεως), can be neither spoken nor talked of, but it alone is beautiful and good, and comes to be suddenly in souls with good natures, on account of our relation to it and love of seeing it (διὰ τὸ συγγένεια καὶ ἔρωτα τοῦ ἰδέαθαι).

OLD MAN: What then is this relationship to god (συγγένεια πρὸς τὸν θεόν) that we have? Or is it that our soul is divine and immortal and a part of that royal mind itself? So that when that mind sees god, thus it is possible for us as well to grasp the divine with our mind and from this to be happy?

JUSTIN: Of course. (4.1-2)

Alluding to the Platonic doctrine of recollection, the old man doubts that the human mind can grasp things that it has never perceived, e.g. god, unless it gets some supernatural help by being “adorned with a holy spirit.” This of course is a proleptic allusion to Christian doctrine that has not yet been formally introduced. Justin replies, again claiming to be giving Plato’s view, that in fact the human mind is naturally of the sort to have a relationship to the divine, consisting in privileged cognitive access. The old man reasonably asks for an elaboration of this relationship. In a Socratic manner, he then immediately suggests an answer to his own question, namely that the soul is “divine and immortal and a part of the royal mind itself” (θεία καὶ ἀθάνατος καὶ αὐτοῦ ἐκείνου τοῦ βασιλικοῦ νοῦ μέρος). This answer anticipates one variation of the Platonist position that Justin himself holds. Justin accordingly enthusiastically accepts the old man’s suggestion—and thus falls into a trap.

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25 I follow the text printed by Van Winden 1971, including the conjecture of λαβεῖν after ὁ μὴ τάχισθαι δι’ αἰσθήσεως ἐλαβεῖν.

26 On this particular variant, the human mind is divine, but not part of or identical to god; it is part of a larger superhuman mind, which beholds god. The phrase βασιλικὸς νοῦς comes from Plato’s Philebus (30d), but Justin develops the idea here in a different way, which owes something to contemporary Platonism; cf. Van Winden 1971, 75-78.
Having secured Justin’s agreement to the immortality of the soul, the old man immediately goes on the attack. His criticism falls into two main parts. First, the old man abruptly brings up the Platonist doctrine of psychic reincarnation in non-human animals, jarringly juxtaposing this with Justin’s recent lofty claims about the soul’s relation to the divine, and makes a series of loosely related objections concerning the doctrine (4.2-7). Have the souls in horses and donkeys seen god? Justin replies that they have not, since they have not been purified through the practice of justice and the rest of virtue. But then the sight of god does not depend purely on a natural relationship between the soul and god. When Justin protests that the particular kind of body that beasts possess limits their cognition, the old man remarks that if those animals could speak, “they would much more reasonably criticize our body” (4.4).  

The old man then asks whether the soul sees god when embodied or when released from the body. Justin replies that while it is possible in both conditions, “the soul attains what it has loved for all time most of all when it is released from the body and comes to be on its own by itself” (4.5). Justin is then forced to admit, however, that the soul does not remember what it saw when again embodied, and thus derives no benefit from it. Nor does reincarnation in animal form serve as an effective penalty for injustice, if the animals do not remember their previous existence and perceive their current state as a punishment (as they evidently do not). “So souls do not see god,” the old man concludes, “nor do they change into other bodies” (4.7). He then qualifies his disagreement: “But I hold as well that souls can discern (νοεῖν) that there is a god (ὁτι ἔστι θεός) and that justice and piety are fine things.” The old man, in other words, does not want to totally strip human souls of cognition of the divine, but he sees it as much more limited than what the Platonists posit, being restricted to an awareness of the existence of god and the need for worship. Here the old man’s position resembles, ironically, the position of Socrates in Plato’s dialogues.

27 Here the old man seems to hint at a topos of Pyrrhonian skepticism concerning the equality or even superiority of animal senses to human ones; cf. Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrhonian Outlines I.62-63.  
28 Cf. Phaedo 75b and Chapter 5, footnote 74.
The second main prong of the old man’s critique attacks the notion of immortality more directly (5.1-2). “Nor must we call the soul immortal,” he begins with new confidence, for if the soul were immortal, then it must also be unbegotten (ἀγέννητος). Justin replies that according to some so-called Platonists (κατά τινας λεγομένους Πλατωνικούς) both the soul and the cosmos are both ungenerated and immortal, but distances himself from this opinion (οὐ μέντοι γε αὐτοῖς συγκατατίθεμαι ἐγώ). He here is alluding to the disputes about whether the creation story in the Timaeus is to be interpreted literally, and also presumably about how to resolve the conflict between the Phaedrus, where the soul is called ungenerated, and the Laws, where its generated status is stressed; in this dispute Justin aligns himself with those who hold soul and cosmos to have a temporal beginning—the position closer to the Christian view. The old man agrees, pointing out that there are good reasons to suppose that the corporeal cosmos was generated and suggesting that if the cosmos was created, souls must have been as well. Implied here is the Aristotelian principle that anything with a beginning must also have an end (§ 2.3). So if souls were created, they cannot be immortal; at best they can be kept in existence by the will of god (5.3-4).

At first glance, the old man’s dialectical objections are directed against an exoteric, literal interpretation of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. From a Christian perspective, human souls ought neither to be strictly indestructible (god must be able to annihilate them, should he wish to) nor reincarnated in non-human animals. But these objections do not cut very deep. As Justin points out, Plato in the Timaeus actually seems to agree with the Christians on the former point (5.4). And, as I have argued, reincarnation is not necessarily a serious or essential element of Plato’s view (though Platonists who did take it seriously could certainly defend its coherence more effectively than Justin does here).

Much more important and profound is the epistemological impetus for the entire critique of the Platonic doctrine of psychic immortality. The author of the Dialogue interprets immortality as meaning that the soul has, by its very nature, a privileged cognitive relationship to the divine, such that a divine life of contemplation is within its reach. He moreover rec-
ognizes that this threatens to undermine the Christian emphasis on the incarnation, faith in revelation and tradition, and the need for a special personal relationship with god. On the Christian view, of course, there are people who have actually seen god, incarnate in a human body, with their very eyes, and who have told other people about it. In order for a prima facie epistemologically disreputable source of information like human testimony to carry the weight that it must for the purposes of institutional Christianity, Plato’s optimism about the soul’s relation to the divine (for Plato, the Forms) must be greatly restrained. In offering this critique, Justin Martyr thus proves an extremely perceptive reader of Plato.

7.3 Health and understanding in Augustine’s Soliloquies I

In this section and the next, I turn to the Soliloquies of Augustine, one of four philosophical dialogues that he composed at a villa at Cassiciacum (near Milan) late in 386 CE, immediately after his conversion to Christianity. The immortality of the soul is a primary theme of this subtle and sophisticated work, which has some striking similarities of structure and content with Plato’s Phaedo—a work that the Greekless Augustine very possibly never read. My concern is less with the content of the arguments that Augustine proposes for immortality than with how he views the role and power of these arguments: how does the peculiar philosophical project of proving the immortality of the soul fare in the context of Augustine’s Christian commitments?

First, some further prefatory remarks about the background of the Soliloquies, a neglected literary gem. The so-called Cassiciacum dialogues (written a decade before the Confessions and some three decades before De trinitate and the De civitate dei) show Augustine at a

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29 I will cite this work according to the edition of Wolfgang Hörmann in the Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum series (vol. 89, 1986). Watson 1990 is edition of the Latin text with translation and commentary for both the Soliloquies and the De immortalitate animae.

30 It seems possible to me that Augustine at one point read Plato’s Phaedo in the lost Latin translation by Apuleius, but most scholars reject this possibility; cf. Courcelle 1969, 168-171. Nothing here will hang on the question of sources, the subject of massive scholarly debate. Besides the “books of the Platonists” (discussed below) Augustine is most obviously dependent on Cicero (in particular the Tusculan Disputations, the Academica, and the partial translation of the Timaeus) for his knowledge of Plato.
moment of intellectual transformation. In the *Confessions*, Augustine describes the “books of disputations” (*libri disputati*) composed at the country villa as “already written in service to you [God], but still panting with the school of pride, as at the end of a race” (IX.4.7); here the “school of pride” is presumably a reference to Platonism. Augustine had once been attracted to the skeptical position of the Academics, who, he believed, “thought that one must doubt concerning everything and held that no truth can be grasped by a human being” (V.10.19). Later he encountered the “books of the Platonists” (VII.9.13), probably texts by Plotinus or Porphyry, whose doctrines he viewed as in some respects prefiguring the Christian beliefs that he later came to accept. Although his stated position in the Cassiciacum dialogues is one of hostility to the Academics and praise for the Platonists and Christians, the reality is more complex: his prior intellectual evolution is reflected in his thoughtful and critical engagement with both the skeptical and dogmatic strands of Plato’s legacy.

The *Soliloquies* stand out among the Cassiciacum dialogues in terms of the dramatic setting. The other three works (the *Contra academicos*, the *De beata vita*, and the *De ordine*) all represent conversations led by Augustine among his friends and family at the villa to which they had retired together. The general form of these dialogues (including the more tedious aspects of the author’s self-depiction) recalls the more sophisticated dialogues of Cicero (e.g. the *De legibus*). In the *Soliloquies*, by contrast, the setting is apparently the interior of Augustine’s own mind (hence the title, a new coinage). The only characters are Augustine himself, in the (often pathetic) role of the questioning student, and Ratio, reason personified, who takes the part of the teacher. Augustine skillfully uses this innovative dramatic setting to put the claims and pretentions of reason under examination.

The topics of the discussion in the *Soliloquies* are “god and the soul,” which, Augustine famously declares near the beginning of the first book, are all that he desires to know about

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31 The best study of the Cassiciacum dialogues is Conybeare 2006. Clark 2008 discusses Augustine’s use of the dialogue form in the Cassiciacum writings with regard to the question of why he later abandoned this form in his later works.
The immortality of the soul is the main topic of the second of the work’s two books; various proofs are offered in the manner of the *Phaedo*, but none are found satisfactory. A successful argument was evidently to have been presented in a third book, which Augustine never got around to writing, beyond some notes which got into independent circulation under the title of the *De immortalitate animae* (to be discussed further below).

In this section, I will consider a series of passages in the first book of the *Soliloquies* in which Augustine and Ratio discuss how “health” is a prerequisite for obtaining knowledge of god. These passages lay the groundwork for the discussion of the soul’s immortality in the second book, to be discussed in the next section. Sickness, understood as an excessive attachment to the sensible world that can manifest itself in the fear of death, is here made an obstacle to correctly evaluating arguments. This is of course strikingly reminiscent of remarks made by Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedo* (§§ 6.2). But for Augustine the need for health is not a ground for skepticism: it instead means that a non-rational factor—religious faith—is required in order to understand the truth. This idea that faith is a necessary prerequisite for certain kinds of philosophical understanding would become a common assumption in medieval Christian philosophy.

To enter *in medias res*: Augustine is hesitating about what knowledge of god is like, and whether we already know anything else (e.g. friends or geometrical facts) in the manner in which we should aspire to know god. Ratio reassures him with an ambitious claim with Platonic resonances: “Reason, who is speaking with you, promises that she will show god to your mind just as the sun is shown (*demonstratur*) to your eyes” (I.6.12). But things are not so simple, as Ratio explains, developing the visual metaphor:

> “I, Ratio, am in minds what sight is in eyes. But having eyes is not the same as looking, and looking is not the same as seeing. Therefore the soul needs three things: that it have eyes that it can use well, that it look, and that it see. Healthy eyes (*oculi sani*) are a mind pure of every bodily stain (*mens ab omni labe corporis pura*), that is, now withdrawn and purified (*purgata*) of desires for mortal things. And nothing else offers the mind this at first than faith (*fides*). For it cannot be demonstrated to a mind defiled with vices and diseased (*vitiis inquinatæ atque aegrotanti*) that it cannot see.
unless healthy; so if not it does not believe (credat) that it will not see in any other way, it will not make an effort for health.” (I.6.12)

In order for the mind to see the truth, it must be healthy, in the sense of being “purified of desires for mortal things.” But this sickness of attachment to the mortal world in fact prevents the mind from recognizing that it is sick and needs to be healthy. So the sick person will never make an effort to recover and is thus trapped in sickness. The only way out is through faith (fides), an extra-rational disposition that leads the sick person to believe (not know) that health and sight and possible. Philosophy thus depends on faith.32

In fact, Ratio and Augustine agree, not only faith but also hope and charity are needed: “without these three no soul is made healthy, such that it can see—that is, understand—its god” (I.6.12).33 Here it is made explicit that “sight” is a metaphor for knowledge: videre stands for intelligere. Ratio then discusses the question of whether faith and hope are still needed once the soul has already come to understand god in this life, and holds that they are:

“But while the soul is in this body, even if it sees—that is, understands—god most fully, nonetheless, since the bodily senses still use their own function, which are not enough to deceive us (ad fallendum), but still have some ability to make us doubtful (ad ambigendum), that which resists the senses and by which we believe in the existence of that truth can still be called faith. Likewise in this life, although the soul is already happy once god has been understood, nonetheless, since it endures many bodily troubles (quia multas molestias corporis sustinet) it must hope that all these annoyances will not be present after death. Therefore hope will not desert the soul while it is in this life.” (I.7.14)

In the afterlife, however, when the soul perceives god directly without bodily impediments, faith and hope will be superfluous: only charity will still be needed. The general picture

32 It is an interesting coincidence (but not, I think, more than that) that the cognates πίστις and fides play such an important role in the Phaedo and the Soliloquies. The Latin philosophical tradition (Cicero, Seneca, Apuleius) does not seem to have treated Greek πίστις as a technical term, nor does it seem to have ever used fides to render it. Augustine’s use of fides obviously comes from Latin translations of the Christian scriptures. To what extent the New Testament concept of πίστις is derivative of the Greek rhetorical/philosophical tradition as opposed to the Hebrew one (in the Septuagint πίστις sometimes renders emunah) is controversial and beyond my scope here.

33 This trilogy of what would later be called the “theological virtues” is silently taken from the writings of Paul (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:13).
here is of course strikingly reminiscent of Socrates’ Defense in Plato’s *Phaedo*. On this picture, embodiment, by which we are subjected to mortal desires and made dependent on the deceptive senses, impedes our cognition of the truth. We should therefore “resist” the senses now and hope for full release from these troubles after death. But Augustine is more optimistic than Socrates about our ability to make progress now, with the help of extra-rational factors like faith.

This view that philosophical investigation about god and the soul must proceed on the basis of a non-philosophical foundation of religious faith would become extremely influential in the Middle Ages.\(^ {34} \)

Consider the end of the first chapter of the *Proslogion* of Anselm of Canterbury, composed around 1077 CE, famous for its ontological “proof” of the existence of god:

> I acknowledge, Lord, and thank you, that you created me in this image of you, so that, remembering you, I might think on you and love you. But this image has been so worn out to destruction by vices, so covered over by the smoke of sin, that it cannot do what it was made to do unless you renew and restore it. I do not try, Lord, to reach your heights, since in no way do I think my intellect is equal to it. But I desire to understand to some extent your truth, which my heart believes and loves. Nor indeed do I seek to understand that I might believe (*quaero intelligere ut credam*), but rather I believe that I might understand (*credo ut intelligam*). For I also believe this, that “unless I will have believed, I will not understand.”\(^ {35} \)

Here too vices and sin due to our incarnate existence make it impossible for us to see the truth in this life without antecedent faith. This is of course in tension with another leading notion of medieval Christian philosophy, namely the objective of providing arguments persuasive to unbelievers on the basis of “reason alone” (cf. Anselm, *Monologion* 1). The important point for us, however, is that Christian thinkers like Augustine and Anselm share Socrates’ concern about the cognitive disadvantages of embodiment, yet think that the skeptical conclusion can

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\(^ {34} \) I here echo Jordan [2006], 164-166, who associates with Augustine and Anselm the idea that “a right disposition is necessary to appreciate the truth of theism.”

\(^ {35} \) The final phrase that Anselm cites (*nisi credidero, non intelligam*) has an interesting history. He is adapting Augustine, who often quotes Isaiah 7:9 as *nisi credideritis, non intellegitis* (e.g. *De libero arbitrio* I.2.4). This is the Latin translation of the biblical verse based on the rendering found in the Septuagint (*εὰν μὴ πιστεύσητε, οὐδὲ μὴ αννήστε*). Jerome’s Vulgate translation, however, following the Hebrew more closely, renders *si non credideritis, non permanebitis* (“you will not be established”).

285
nonetheless be resisted, because philosophical investigations can begin from a non-rational platform of religious commitment.

The discussion in the Soliloquies so far has been programmatic, but it is about to get personal. Before the investigation of god and the soul can properly begin, Ratio says, we must now examine concretely “what comes before everything: whether we are healthy” (utrum sani simus, I.9.16). Ratio therefore asks Augustine: “Do you love anything beyond the knowledge of yourself and god?” Health, after all, consists in being free of mortal desires. Augustine replies that he is not sure, but thinks that he can be distracted from his desire to know god by only three other things: “the fear of the loss of those whom I love, the fear of pain, and the fear of death” (metu mortis). Ratio responds that these fears indicate that Augustine loves life and health, both his own and that of others, and is therefore still subject to “all the diseases and troubles of the soul” (omnibus...morbis animi et perturbationibus). The fear of death, which the argument is intended to cure, is at the same time evidence of an attachment to earthly life which would impede Augustine’s ability to grasp the argument in the first place.

This attachment is not easily overcome. When Augustine protests that Ratio is being too severe in not taking into account how far he has come—here his recent conversion to Christianity and his abandonment of a long-time female lover are in the background—Ratio agrees to discuss whether Augustine has “made progress” (profecisse), first asking him if he desires wealth. Augustine replies that he has not been in interested in money since reading Cicero’s Hortensius fourteen years earlier. What about positions of honor? Augustine says that he has recently stopped wanting those as well. Well, Ratio probes, what about a wife? The exchange here is worth quoting at length:

RATIO: Aren’t you sometimes delighted at a woman who is beautiful, modest, compliant, educated, or who could be easily educated by you, bringing along enough of a dowry (since you despise riches), such that she would never be a burden on your leisure, especially if you can hope and be certain that she won’t bother you at all?

AUGUSTINE: Paint her however you want and pile on every good feature—I have decided that nothing must be avoided as much as sex (concubitum). I think that
nothing casts a manly soul down from its Citadel (ex arce deiciat animum virilem) more than womanly caresses (blandimenta feminea) and those kinds of bodily contact that cannot be had without a wife. ... Therefore I have commanded myself—quite fairly and advantageously for the freedom of my soul, I believe—not to desire, not to seek out, and not to marry a wife.

RATIO: I don’t want to know about what you’ve decided, but whether you’re still struggling or have truly conquered desire. This is a matter of the health of your eyes.

AUGUSTINE: I’m not looking for anything like this at all, I don’t want any part of it: I even recall such matters with horror and scorn. What more do you want? (I.10.17)

There is a certain irony in Augustine’s construction of the feminine here as a dangerous threat to masculine rationality, as the very mention of the topic seems to lead to him getting emotional himself. In his actual renunciation of marriage and sex in favor of the pursuit of knowledge, Augustine goes much further than Socrates in the Phaedo (who paints such an ideal but does not take it on himself). Yet even this outward renunciation proves insufficient: it is the internal desires that are hardest to eradicate.

After further questioning Augustine about his desires for food (these he has overcome), Ratio concludes: “You have made a lot of progress, but what remains is still a very big impediment to seeing that light” (I.11.18). Ratio here applies to matters epistemic the paradoxical Stoic all-or-nothing view of morality, whereby moral progress is possible but does not actually improve us until complete. “Either nothing remains for us to conquer,” Ratio says, “or we have made no progress at all, and the corruption (tabem) of all those parts we thought had been cut away remains.” On this view, still strongly reminiscent of Socrates’ Defense, it is no wonder that divine help is needed! The interrogation of Augustine’s worldly attachments therefore continues, before reaching the following climax:

RATIO: Now we ask what you’re like as a lover of wisdom (amator sapientiae). You desire to see and hold her in a most chaste vision and embrace, as if naked (quasi nudam) with no covering in between—a way that wisdom does not allow herself to be seen, except to a very few and most carefully chosen of her lovers. If you were on fire with love for some beautiful woman, wouldn’t she rightly deny herself to you, if she found out that you loved something else besides herself? Will the most chaste beauty of wisdom show herself to you, if you do not burn for her alone?

AUGUSTINE: Why am I still being kept in wretched suspense, and put off with miserable torture? I’ve certainly shown that I love nothing else, if indeed that which is not loved
on its own account (non propter se amatur) is not loved. I love only wisdom on its own account, while other things I either want to have, or fear to lack, on account of wisdom: life, leisure, friends. What limit can this love of wisdom’s beauty have, in which I not only do not envy others, but even seek more who will desire with me, yearn with me, hold it with me, enjoy it with me? They will be all the more my friends to the extent that what we love is held the more in common.

Ratio: That is exactly how the lovers of wisdom should be. She seeks such lovers, and union (coniunctio) with her is chaste and without any defilement. But there’s not just one way to get to her: each man grasps that unique and truest good in accord with his own health and strength. (I.13.22-23)

Here philosophy is vividly figured as an ersatz erotic domain where sapientia replaces real (dangerous) women. Intercourse with wisdom, it is emphasized, is chaste. Yet the development of the metaphor leads to bizarre results. Augustine is cast in the role of an anguished lover, worthy of Catullus or Propertius, while wisdom ends up exemplifying the worst possible qualities of a mistress: she is jealous, wanting her lovers to love only her, yet promiscuous, having many lovers at once. In order to gain a place among her lovers, everything in life, even life itself, must be loved only instrumentally, as a means to wisdom.

With such an exacting standard, one suspects that Augustine’s process of self-examination (and self-flagellation) required to prove “health” as a prerequisite for philosophical investigation may never really end. In other words, linking our ability to discover the truth to an impossibly demanding moral regimen threatens to play into the hands of the Academics who hold that “no truth can be grasped by a human being” (Confessions V.10.19). Though Ratio concedes that perfect health is perhaps not necessary to reach wisdom, the impossibility of an entirely pure mortal existence means that the skeptical threat posed by embodiment can never be fully banished. This is captured by an exchange when the conversation between Augustine and Ratio, broken off for the night, resumes the next day. “The soul is often deceived,” Ratio says, “into thinking itself healthy and boasting of it.” Here the therapeutic metaphor (implicit all along in the talk of health) is now developed at length:

Ratio: That beauty [i.e. wisdom] knows when she should reveal herself. For she fulfills the duty of a doctor (medici munere), and knows better who are healthy than those themselves who are being treated. We think we know how far up we have come, but we cannot either think or feel how far down we were and what progress we have made;
we believe that we are healthy [only] in comparison with a worse disease. Do you not see how we spoke yesterday as if totally safe, saying that no plague (pestis) now held us, that we loved nothing but wisdom, and sought and desired other things only on her account? How foul, base, disgusting, and terrible a feminine embrace seemed, when we were asking among ourselves about desire for a wife! But lying awake last night, when we thought over the same things again, you felt how different things were than you had thought, how the bitter sweetness (amara suavitas) of those imagined caresses had tickled you (titilaverit). Much, much less than usual, but still more than you had thought! It was as if that most secret doctor (secretissimus ille medicus) was showing you both how far you had come through her care, and what remained to be cared for.

Augustine: Be quiet, I beg you, be quiet! Why do you torture me? Why do you dig and descend so deep? I cannot endure more weeping—I promise nothing now, I presume nothing—just don’t ask me about these things. (I.14.25-26)

The extirpation of mortal desire as a propaedeutic to philosophy will require an ongoing, painful spiritual exercise of purification. Augustine is finding out what it is like to try to live out the recommendations made in Socrates’ Defense in the *Phaedo*.

The message of the first book of the *Soliloquies* is summed up in a piece of advice that Ratio offers Augustine: “There is only one instruction I can give you; I know nothing else: these sensible things are to be completely avoided (penitus esse ista sensibilia fugienda), and we must be extremely careful, while we are in this body, lest our wings be impeded by their glue” (I.14.24). But the dramatization of Augustine’s inner struggles leaves it doubtful how far this advice can really be carried out. The arguments for the immortality of the soul in the second book of the *Soliloquies*, to which I now turn, are thus built on shaky ground.

### 7.4 The arguments for the immortality of the soul in Augustine’s *Soliloquies* II

The first book of the *Soliloquies* has largely concerned Augustine himself and his readiness for philosophical investigation in general. The second book of the *Soliloquies* begins with Augustine offering, at Ratio’s invitation, a very brief prayer: “God who is always the same, may I know myself, may I know you” (II.1.1). This signals a return to the program announced at the beginning of the first book, namely to come to know god and the soul. Ratio begins

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36 At the end of his life, Augustine would look back upon this sentence and censure it as too close to the sentiment of Porphyry that *omne corpus fugiendum* (*Retractationes* I.4).
the new phase of the investigation by probing Augustine’s self-knowledge, asking him a series of questions about what he knows. Augustine replies that he knows that he exists and thinks, but doesn’t know how he knows this, or whether he is a simple or complex thing, or is moved, or is immortal. “Of all the things that you said you don’t know,” Ratio then asks, “what would you prefer to know first?” Augustine replies: “Whether I am immortal” (utrum immortalis sim). This sets the agenda for the entire second book, in which three proofs for the immortality of the soul will be developed—and all acknowledged as failures.

Ratio quickly sets about constructing the first proof, by way of a discussion of falsehood. Augustine agrees that “falsehood (falsitas) is not in things but in sense (in sensu), since no one is deceived (fallitur) who has not assented to false things” (II.3.3). But there is no sense, and thus no falsehood, without a soul. The exchange continues:

**Ratio:** Now answer this, whether it seems to you that there could ever be a time when falsehood did not exist.

**Augustine:** How could that seem possible, when finding truth is so difficult that it would be more absurd to say that falsehood rather than truth does not exist?

**Ratio:** Now do you consider that a thing that does not live can think?

**Augustine:** That can’t be.

**Ratio:** Then it’s been shown that the soul always lives.

**Augustine:** You press me too quickly into joy! Go step by step, I beg you.

**Ratio:** But if all the premises were correct, I don’t see anything to be doubted about this.

**Augustine:** You’re going too fast, I say. It’s easier for me think that I granted something rashly (temere), than that I be made confident about the immortality of the soul. But unroll this conclusion and show how it was reached.

**Ratio:** You said that there could be no falsehood without sense, and that falsehood cannot not exist; so there is always sense. But there’s no sense without a soul, so the soul is therefore eternal (sempiterna). But it can’t have sense if it isn’t alive. So the soul is always alive.

**Augustine:** “O dagger of lead!” In that way you could conclude that a human being is immortal, if it was granted to you that this world could never exist without a human being, and this world is eternal.

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37 This is a quote from Cicero, *De finibus* IV.48; the context there is a critique of Stoic arguments that the bonum is also honestum.
Augustine’s objection, as he later more clearly explains it, is that it could be the case that “souls are born and die, and it is because of their succession, not their immortality, that they are never absent from the world” (II.4.5). There is a twofold comic irony in the exchange cited above. First, the argument relies, bizarrely, on the premise that falsehood is ineliminable, which Augustine accepts precisely because “finding the truth is so difficult.” Such a premise seems destined to cast doubt on whatever it is used to prove. Second, it is Ratio who is portrayed as hastily claiming victory after a fallacious inference; Augustine, though equally eager to see the conclusion proved, must restrain the temeritas of reason itself.

Ratio leads Augustine back into a long and sinuous discussion of truth and falsehood, before eventually assembling, somewhat sneakily, the premises for a second attempt at a proof of psychic immortality (II.12.22). Ratio first introduces a distinction between two ways that we can speak of “something being in something” (esse aliquid in aliquo): separably or inseparably. The explanation of this distinction is not very clear, but apparently being-in inseparably is the relation that the essential properties of a thing have to the thing (for instance, heat in fire), while being-in separably refers to a wide range of other relations, including spatial being-in and merely accidental properties. Augustine remarks to Ratio that such terminology is “very old stuff for us.” Apparently he must have encountered something like it in his early study of the Aristotelian theory of the categories (cf. Confessions IV.16.28).

“Do you not concede,” Ratio then asks Augustine, “that what is in a subject inseparably (quod in subiecto est inseparabiliter) cannot endure if the subject itself does not endure?” (II.12.22). Augustine agrees, noting that if a wall changes color, it is still a wall, but on the other hand “if fire lacks heat, it will not even be fire, nor can we call something snow unless it is white.” Ratio then triumphantly concludes that the immortality of the soul has been proven, “unless perhaps you say a soul is still a soul, even if it dies” (II.13.23). This line of thought is identical to that of the Final Argument of Plato’s Phaedo (102a-107a), where
the examples of fire and snow are also used (103c-e). In brief, the argument is that since to be alive is part of soul’s essential character (life is in the soul inseparably), the soul can never be deprived of life while still being a soul. Augustine’s response to Ratio’s confident pronouncement, however, is doubtful:

“Indeed, I would never say that [i.e. that a soul can be dead]. Rather, I say that by the fact that it perishes, it is made not to be a soul. Nor will I be moved from this opinion by what has been said by great philosophers (quod a magnis philosophis dictum est), that that thing which, wherever it goes, provides life, cannot admit death into itself. Indeed, although light brightens wherever it can enter, and cannot admit darkness into itself because of the notorious power of contraries (propter memorabilem illam vim contrariorum), nonetheless it is extinguished, and that place where the light was extinguished grows dark. So that which resisted the darkness did not in any way admit darkness into itself, and thus made a place for it by perishing, just as it also could have by departing. Therefore I fear that death should befall the body as darkness does a place, such that when the soul departs like light, at the same time it is extinguished.” (II.13.23)

Augustine here offers a succinct statement of what many, beginning with the early Peripatetic Strato of Lampsacus, have seen as a fatal flaw in the Final Argument of the Phaedo. As Hackforth puts it, “what has been shown is that the predicate ‘deathless’ is contained in the meaning of the subject, soul; whenever, therefore, this subject exists it has this predicate: but to show that the subject always does exist is quite another matter.” In the terms of Augustine’s comparison, the soul is like light, which cannot become dark and still exist as light, but can be extinguished and cease to exist.

This is the first of several moments in the Soliloquies in which Augustine explicitly recognizes his place within a long philosophical tradition. He is quite aware that the argument he rejects has been favored by “great philosophers”—whom, however, he does not name. What sources inspired Augustine here is difficult to say. It seems unlikely that he was inspired by the discussion of the Final Argument by Plotinus (Ennead IV.7.11.1-9), since Plotinus,

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38 Hackforth 1955, 163, who cites the criticism of Strato (who compares the soul to fire, which cannot be made cold, but which can be put out), preserved by Damascius, In Phaedonem I 442.

39 Cf. Soliloquies II.14.26, where Ratio refers to “many books written before our time, which we have not read.” Augustine mentions both Plato and Plotinus by name just once in the Soliloquies, in the same breath (I.4.9). These, along with one reference to the Tiberian doctor and encyclopedist Cornelius Celsus (I.12.21), are the only proper names in the work.

292
in response to the same objection, actually rejects the analogy between the way that the soul has life and the way that fire, which of course can be extinguished, has heat; Plotinus moreover does not use Socrates’ example of snow. The route of textual transmission here is puzzling, if we accept the communis opinio that Augustine had no direct access to the Phaedo.

In any case, the result of the argument’s failure is more anguish for Augustine:

“If the soul is kindled in a particular body like a light (\textit{anima quasi lumen accenditur}) and cannot last anywhere else, and all death is the extinction of soul in the body, then some manner of life must be chosen\footnote{Plotinus does mention fire and snow together in a passage of \textit{Ennead} V.1 (“On the Three Primary Hypostases”), but here the context concerns the doctrine of emanation and has nothing to do with the soul’s immortality. Interestingly, in both Plato and Plotinus the essential quality of snow is that it is cold, while for Augustine it is rather that it is white (\textit{candida}).} as much as a human being is permitted, whereby the life he lives may be lived with security and tranquility (\textit{cum securitate ac tranquillitate}), although I don’t know how this is possible if the soul dies! Oh they are many times blessed, those who have been persuaded either by themselves or from somewhere else that death is not to be feared, even if the soul perishes. But so far no arguments, no books (\textit{nullae adhuc rationes, nulli libri}) have been able to persuade wretched me.” (II.13.23)

Those who have been persuaded that “death is not to be feared, even if the soul perishes” and are thereby able to live a life of tranquility must be the Epicureans. Augustine views their therapeutic project of making death a matter of indifference to us as a hopeless one. In response to his desperation, Ratio quickly offers a new, third argument:

“If anything that is in a subject lasts forever, then it is necessary that this subject too last forever. And every field of learning (\textit{disciplina}) is in the soul as its subject. Necessarily, therefore, the soul must last forever if the field of learning does. But a field of learning is truth, and truth lasts forever, as reason persuaded in the beginning of this book. Therefore the soul lasts, and is never said to be dead.” (II.13.24)

Although Ratio does not say here that the \textit{disciplina} is in the soul inseparably, this must be what is meant if the argument is to have any plausibility; when the argument is later restated the adverb \textit{inseparabiliter} is included (II.19.33). This line of thought is likely Augustine’s

\footnote{Hörmann in his edition prints \textit{omnisque mors est extinctio quaedam animae in corpore vel vitae, aliquid genus eligendum est...} I strike out the \textit{vel} and repunctuate: \textit{in corpore, vitae aliquid genus...} This seems to me necessary for the sense.}
original invention, as the central role of the concept of a disciplina in the argument reflects his interests in the artes liberales at the time (as evidenced by the earlier Cassiciacum dialogues, especially the De ordine).\textsuperscript{42} This third argument will be developed further in the De immortalitate animae. Yet at this point, at least, Augustine doubts about it, and raises two concerns:

“I want to be filled with joy, but I hold myself back for two reasons. First, it concerns me that we have used such a round-about way (\textit{circuitu tanto}), following I know not what chain of reasonings (\textit{ratiocinationum catenam}), when the whole point that was at issue could be demonstrated so briefly, as it just now has been demonstrated. Therefore it troubles me that our speech wandered around so much, as if waiting to ambush us. Second, I don’t see how a discipline is always in that soul, especially that of disputation, both since so few know it and since those who do were from infancy on so long ignorant of it. We cannot say that the souls of the unlearned are not souls, or that the discipline is in the soul of those who do not know it. And if this is extremely absurd, it remains either that truth is not always in the soul, or that the discipline is not truth.” (II.14.25)

Augustine’s first concern relates to their whole method of proceeding. If the successful proof is so simple, why was such a circuitous chain of reasoning required to reach it? Here he manifests the same mistrust of arguments that plagues Socrates’ listeners in the Phaedo. His second concern is substantive: what about people who have not learned a discipline? Are their souls mortal, since the eternal truth is not in them?

Ratio sympathizes with Augustine’s frustration, then leads him through a series of questions designed to cement the claim, agreed on earlier, that truth is immortal. This is in effect to evade Augustine’s specific objection, but Augustine eventually raises it again: “I beg you, solve what’s left, how learning and truth can be understood to be in an unlearned soul, for we cannot say that it is mortal” (II.19.33). Ratio responds that another book would be required in order to deal with the subject sufficiently, and Augustine accepts this.

The final pages of the Soliloquies are then taken up with a strange digression on the question of “what is the difference between the true form (\textit{veram figuram}) that is contained in the intelligence and that which thought fashions for itself, which in Greek is called either

\footnote{Somewhat similar arguments, proceeding from the nature of what is known to the nature of the knower, are found in Plotinus (cf. \textit{Ennead} IV.7.8.38-45, 12.8-11).}
The strange conclusion of the Soliloquies as we have them, aporetic yet hopeful, is a reminder that Augustine originally planned to write a third book. As he tells us in the Retractationes, (a retrospective commentary on his own works, written at the end of his life):

After the Soliloquies, when I had come back to Milan from the countryside, I wrote the book De immortalitate animae, which I wanted to be a sort of reminder (commonitorium) to myself in order to finish the Soliloquies, which were left incomplete. But somehow against my will it got out into people’s hands and now is listed among my shorter works. It is so obscure, on account of the contortion and compression of its reasoning, that reading it taxes even my own attention, and I can barely understand it myself. (I.5.1)

Modern readers generally share the author’s verdict on the De immortalitate animae. The short treatise is simply a catalogue of arguments, whose confusing and repetitive presentation probably reflects Augustine’s plan to cast them into the sinuous dialogue form seen in the Soliloquies. Its unfinished nature has led to an unfair tendency of reading it as a dogmatic handbook. The finished product would have included round-about chains of reasoning, deliberate fallacies, and dialectical challenges, which are all unmarked in the text we have.⁴³

This peculiar textual situation makes it hard to assess Augustine’s overarching intention for the Soliloquies. It seems clear that the arguments for the immortality of the soul presented in the work’s second book are not meant to be satisfactory: to a greater degree than in Plato’s Phaedo, the unsatisfactory nature of the arguments, from either a logical or a psychological perspective, is explicitly recognized. Yet this does not deter Ratio and Augustine from the

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⁴³Conybeare 2006, 173 is thus incorrect, for multiple reasons, to label the De immortalitate animae “a sequel of grinding conventionality” in contrast to the Soliloquies.
project of trying to put the soul’s immortality on a sound rational basis. It is certainly true that many of the passages we have considered from the Soliloquies, had they been found in Plato, would have been natural candidates for an ironic interpretation, whereby the project itself would be implicitly exposed as quixotic. It is unclear, however, whether Augustine intended for the three-book work to culminate in a successful proof and thus an ultimate vindication of the claims of reason in this domain.

We should of course allow for indeterminacy and change in Augustine’s intentions as an author: the Soliloquies were the last of the Cassiciacum works to be written, and his failure to actually complete the three-book project is doubtless significant. Ironic readings of Augustine are moreover constrained by the large amounts of his writing that we possess and the biographical context into which he himself inserts them in works like the Confessions and the Retractationes. Consider a passage from a letter that Augustine wrote in 387 to his friend Nebridius:

What if the soul dies? Then truth dies, or intelligence is not truth, or intelligence is not in the soul, or something can die in which there is something immortal—but that none of these things are possible is explained in our Soliloquies, and it’s persuasive enough (satisque persuasum est), but we are frightened and waiver (territamur atque titubamus) because of some familiarity with evils (consuetudine malorum). Finally, even if the soul dies, which I do not see as in any way possible, it has been sufficiently shown through our leisure that the happy life (beatam vitam) is not found in joy over sensible things. (Epistle 3.4)

This passage shows that Augustine’s attitude towards his own arguments for the immortality of the soul is complex. On the one hand, he seems to think that he has found an argument that is logically probative (I will not comment here on its merits). On the other hand, his own nagging doubts remain. But at this point, at least, he seems to have taken to heart the apparent advice of Socrates to his listeners in the Phaedo: if the argument is not persuasive, then the problem is not with the argument, but rather with us.
8 Conclusion: Longing For Immortality

“It is necessary to desire immortality along with the good (ἀθανασίας ἐπιθυμεῖν μετὰ ἄγαθον), on the basis of what we have agreed, if indeed eros is for having the good always. From this account it is necessary that eros be of immortality as well.’”
(Symposium 206e-207a)

8.1 Immortality in the Symposium (204c-212a)

During his speech in praise of erotic love (eros) in Plato’s Symposium, Socrates recounts a conversation that he had with the mysterious foreign priestess Diotima. The two of them agree on an unusual understanding of eros as referring to the universal human desire for good things and ultimately happiness (εὐδαιμονία), to which the acquisition and secure possession of good things leads (204e-205a). The real object of eros is thus “to have the good always” (206a). Provided that we understand “the good” in a suitably broad and final way, as happiness in the sense of full flourishing, then it seems true that we desire to have this not just momentarily, but in a secure and lasting way.\(^1\)

But Diotima then infers that this desire of the lover for the permanent possession of the good is a desire for immortality as well (207a). On this view, eros aims at immortality, either because permanent existence is a necessary means to the end of happiness or because happiness, rightly understood, includes immortality.\(^2\) Is this true? Is the natural human attraction to the good really an attraction to permanent existence as well? Could we not

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1 As Sheffield 2006, 80-81 argues.
2 Sheffield 2006, 82-83 makes the latter claim, but the former is the more natural reading of Diotima’s remark; deciding this issue is not important for my purposes.
simply desire to have the good for the extent of our earthly life, and define the achievement of happiness in this way?

This idea that *eros* is a desire for immortality suggests, at any rate, that we do not have immortality. Socrates goes on to relate Diotima’s explanation of how we can obtain it:

“Mortal nature (ἡ θνητὴ φύσις) seeks to be always and to be immortal to the extent possible (κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν ἀεί τε εἶναι καὶ ἀθάνατος). But it is possible only in this way, through generation, whereby something new is always left in place of what is old. For this is the case even during that time in which each one of the living beings is said to live and be the same—for instance, how a man is said to be the same (ὁ αὐτὸς) from childhood until he becomes old. ... In this way everything that is mortal is preserved, not by being the same in every way forever, like the divine (τὸ θεῖον), but by what departs or grows old leaving behind something else new of the sort that it was. By this device, Socrates, the mortal—body and all the other things—takes part in immortality, but the immortal does so in another way.” (207d-208b)

Diotima’s cryptic final remark here contrasts the way in which body and other mortal things “take part in immortality” (ἀθανασίας μετέχειν) with another way of doing so, which belongs to what is divine. The mortal way of partaking in immortality is vicarious: the continuous replacement of the old with the new functions as a substitute for the continuous existence of the same thing. Diotima suggests that this replacement in fact occurs even during the span of one human life, during which time a human being is referred to as the same, despite the fact that both the parts of the body and the contents of the mind are constantly coming to be, passing away, and being replaced. By contrast, the divine is literally immortal in the sense of “being the same in every way forever” (παντάπασιν τὸ αὐτὸ ἀεὶ ἔσται).

Diotima’s guiding example of how what is mortal achieves its vicarious immortality is procreation, in which parents attain a form of immortality by leaving behind children who are in at least certain ways like themselves (206c, 208e). But Diotima also uses the mortal desire for immortality to explain a broad range of other human strivings. The love of

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3 Here Diotima touches on the problems, in Locke’s terms, of both “humane” and “personal” identity (cf. § 3.6). She seems to be suggesting that the continuity and identity of the human being during this life (by either bodily or psychological criteria) is to some degree illusory or merely a matter of convention. We ourselves are in flux. If we accept this, we may come to see immortality by replacement (e.g. by procreation) as not so different from the type of survival through time that we are normally accustomed too. Of course, the two kinds of replacement are still rather different. We are in gradual, non-total flux, with only small parts being replaced at one time, like the “ship of Theseus.”
honor (φιλοτιμία), for instance, is analyzed as a desire “to leave behind immortal fame (κλέος ἀθάνατον) for all time” (208c). Even famous acts of apparent self-sacrifice for love (Alcestis for Admetus, Achilles for Patroclus) were really undertaken as a means to “immortal memory,” as all these people were “in love with immortality” (208d-e). Similarly driven are poets, inventors, and lawgivers, who by “giving birth” not to literal children but rather to “intelligence and the rest of virtue” hope to achieve a lasting reputation (209a-e).

Diotima here appeals to and extends an attitude foundational to “heroic” morality. In Homer’s Iliad, Achilles famously foresees that if he returns to the fight at Troy, he will perish but gain “undying fame” (IX.413). Although Achilles rejects this as a goal (at least temporarily), in doing so he places himself fundamentally outside the moral framework of his culture. This framework survived into the age of the polis. Thucydides has Pericles console the Athenians, discouraged by the progress of the Peloponnesian War, that “even if one day we give in—for it is in the nature of all things to decline—the memory (μνήμη) will be left behind that among the Greeks we ruled over the most Greeks” (II.64.3-4). On this way of thinking, fame and survival in memory are structuring objectives for human aspiration and a compensation for the inevitability of human finitude.

But Diotima also has in mind a very different way that humans can satisfy their desire for immortality, namely philosophical contemplation. In the famous climax to her speech, she explains how ordinary erotic attractions, properly practiced and understood, ought to

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4 Sheffield 2006, 92 prefers to translate the phrase τοῦ γὰρ τοῦ ἀθανάτου ἐρῶσιν (208e1) as “they are in love with the immortal thing.” Both translations are possible linguistically (on my view, just as τὸ καλὸν can mean “beauty,” τὸ ἀθάνατον can mean “immortality”).

5 The phrase κλέος ἀφθιτον has etymological analogues in early Indic texts (cf. śravas...akṣitam in Rig Veda I.9.7), attesting to its resonance as an ethical ideal in Indo-European culture. My thinking about the scene in the ninth book of the Iliad has been influenced by the beautiful treatment in Redfield 1994, 3-29. Note that Diotima’s analysis of Achilles’ motivations seems untrue to Homer’s presentation. When Achilles does eventually return to the battlefield, a desire to avenge Patroclus (i.e. an aspect of eros as traditionally understood rather than a desire for fame) seems to be of paramount importance.

6 The way in which Diotima suggests that (at least some significant) human motivation is founded in a desire for immortality through the persistence of one’s own reputation or progeny is interestingly different from the way that Scheffler 2013 sees human valuing as requiring the future continuity of the human race in general. Of course, the survival of humanity in general is a prerequisite for the persistence in memory of oneself and of the survival of particular lines, communities, traditions, works, etc. At the same time I doubt that the future survival of humanity qua humanity (without more particular kinds of survival as well) is really enough to ground our values and projects.
function as stepping stones, allowing us to contemplate beauty at progressively higher levels of abstraction until we come to the vision of the “the beautiful on its own” (αὐτὸ τὸ καλὸν).

This contact with the Form is the real goal that we should aspire to. As Diotima concludes:

“‘There in life (ἐνταῦθα τοῦ βίου), my dear Socrates, if anywhere else, it is worth living for a human being, beholding the beautiful on its own. If you ever see this, it won’t seem to you to be in the same league as the gold and clothes and beautiful boys and young men that you now see and are enthralled by. Now if it were somehow possible to look at a beloved and always be together with him, you and many others would be ready to neither eat nor drink, but would prefer just to behold them and be together with them. What, then, do we think would happen if it came about that someone could see the beautiful on its own, unadulterated, pure, unmixed, not contaminated with human flesh and colors and other mortal nonsense? What if he could look at the divine and uniform beautiful on its own? Do you think that a lowly life would come about for the human being who looks over there and beholds it with the right thing and is together with it? Keep in mind that there alone, seeing the beautiful with that by which it is visible, he will be able to bear not phantoms of virtue, since he is not in contact with a phantom, but true virtue, since he is in contact with the truth. And doesn’t it belong to the one who bears and rears true virtue to become dear to the gods, and if indeed it belongs to any other human being to become immortal, it does to him?’” (211d-212a)

Immortality thus returns in the concluding words of Diotima’s speech (καὶ εἴπέρ τῳ ἄλλῳ ἀνθρώπων ἀθανάτῳ καὶ ἐκείνῳ). Here she holds out the possibility that the philosopher can become actually immortal (in contrast to other human beings, who must be content with vicarious substitutes). This “becoming immortal” seems to result from or involve the contemplation of the Form. But this is only a possibility: the tentative wording of her question leaves quite open whether even the philosopher can really achieve this. Socrates claims to have been persuaded by what Diotima said (212b), but does not answer her question.

Throughout this extremely complex passage in the Symposium, the doctrine of immortality familiar from Plato’s other dialogues, i.e. the immortality of the human soul specifically, goes completely unmentioned. Admittedly, nothing that Diotima says actually rules out psychic immortality: perhaps the soul counts as a divine thing and participates in immortality

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7The phrase τίκτειν οὐκ εἴδωλα ἀρετῆς, ἅτε οὐκ εἰδώλου ἐφαπτομένω, ἀλλὰ ἀληθῆ, ἅτε τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἐφαπτομένου echoes Socrates’ wording in the Affinity Argument in the Phaedo regarding how the soul either wanders when in contact with sensibles or becomes stable when in contact with the Forms (ἄτε τοιούτων ἐφαπτομένη, 79c-d).
in the way that the divine does (cf. 208b). But it seems very unlikely that the immortality of the soul in the literal sense is being silently assumed here. In the context of stressing the various lengths that humans will go to fulfill their desire for immortality, why would Diotima not mention even *en passant* that humans have another, non-vicarious version of immortality available to them (automatically, as it were)? And if the human soul just is in general an immortal thing, why would she, in the final sentence of her speech, speak of the philosopher—and the philosopher alone—*becoming* immortal?

This silence on the soul’s immortality has troubled scholars, given that the *Symposium* is often dated to the same (middle) period of Plato’s career as the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. On my view, however, there is no problem here. The picture that Diotima presents is perfectly consonant with understanding of immortality that has emerged from a close examination of the rest of the Platonic corpus in the preceding chapters. According to Diotima, human beings long for immortality, which they understand primarily in the literal sense of permanent postmortem survival. This longing is tragic, however, in as much as this kind of immortality is simply unattainable for humans. They therefore search for various substitute forms of immortality, the highest of which is that sought by the philosopher, consisting in a cognitive relationship with the eternal Forms.

The immortality that the philosopher seeks can in a certain sense be called genuine immortality. It does not consist, however, in temporally infinite survival, but rather in a blessed and divine existence in communion with an entity not subject to change, decay, or death. Whether the philosopher’s quest for this kind of contact with the Forms is possible or ultimately quixotic remains, however, unclear.

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8 So Dover 1980, 149-150; for objections against this solution, cf. Sheffield 2006, 147n47.
9 I am here largely in agreement with the recent treatments by Obdrzalek 2010 and Hooper 2013, who both provide a survey previous contributions to the debate (of which the most valuable is surely O’Brien 1984) and hold that literal psychic immortality is not envisaged in the *Symposium*.
10 Cf. Sheffield 2006, 146-153 develops a similar interpretation of the philosopher obtaining immortality and happiness in the act of contemplation, rightly emphasizing that Plato's text does not suggest that the immortality attained by the philosopher is somehow also a vicarious one, based on the propagation of ideas or virtues in the minds of younger disciples.
8.2 Responses and Resonances: Epicurus, Augustine, Duns Scotus

Plato’s Socrates has Diotima posit a basic longing for immortality as part of a descriptive analysis of human motivation in general. But the fact that her analysis is most developed with respect to certain apparently exemplary or outstanding types of lives (those of sacrifice or heroism or great accomplishment) gives it an implicitly normative valence as well. Although Plato seems at first to be simply unveiling how many common human ambitions are in fact manifestations of an underlying desire for immortality, he effectively suggests that it is good for human to have this longing and that we ought to do our utmost to fulfill it. We should not, like Achilles, be tempted to choose the security of home and family over “undying fame” or the higher kind of immortality sought by the philosopher.

This advocacy of immortality did not go unchallenged. Epicurus, in his Letter to Menoecccus, gives the following counsel:

Become accustomed to thinking that death is nothing to us. Everything good and bad lies in perception, but death is the loss of perception. Thus the correct knowledge that death is nothing to us makes it possible to enjoy the mortal life (ἀπολαυστὸν ποιεῖ τὸ τῆς ζωῆς θνητόν)—not by adding an infinite time to it, but by removing the longing for immortality. (Diogenes Laertius X.124)

Epicurus here condemns the “longing for immortality” (τὸν τῆς ἀθανασίας πόθον), understood as desire for postmortem survival, seeing in it a manifestation of (rather than a cure for) an irrational fear of death. Epicurus does not entirely abandon immortality, understood in a non-temporal sense as divinity, as an ethical ideal—he later encourages Menoeceus to live as “a god among human beings” (X.135, cf. X.123)—but for him attaining immortality amounts strictly to achieving the untroubled pleasure of tranquility (ἀταραξία) that the gods themselves enjoy. Achieving this perfect tranquility is the goal of the Epicurean life, but its temporal extension is irrelevant. “Infinite time and limited time hold equal pleasure,” Epicurus writes, “if one measures pleasure’s limits by reasoning” (Kuriae Doxai 19). Just as an obsession with prolonging our lifespan will only detract from our tranquility, so too will

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11 On Epicurus’s complex attitudes towards immortality see Warren 2000.
many of the routes to vicarious immortality suggested by Diotima (like artistic production or political involvement), at which Epicurus also looks somewhat askance.

In sum, Epicurus rejects the Platonic connection between immortality and the general human desire for the good as both a descriptive analysis and a normative ideal. A longing for immortality is neither a basic, brute fact about the psychological constitution of humans, nor a laudable one: it is rather a contingent, constructed belief that functions as a pernicious distraction from the true path to human happiness. The Roman Epicurean poet Lucretius goes further, offering what Nussbaum calls the “banquet argument” (cf. De rerum natura, III.931-945), according to which life “has a structure in time that reaches a natural and appropriate termination.”¹² This thought could lead to the more general view that our mortal finitude, far from threatening moral goodness, actually structures our ethical possibilities.¹³

The Epicurean protest against Plato is not at all in evidence in an influential text from the end of antiquity that is strikingly reminiscent of—yet also very different from—the Symposium. This is a discussion of immortality in the thirteenth book of Augustine’s De trinitate. Like Diotima, Augustine claims that the universal desire for happiness entails a desire for immortality (XIII.8.11).¹⁴ He begins from the Socratic thesis—which he calls “a claim so examined, scrutinized, sifted, and certain”—that all human beings want to be happy (beatos esse omnes homines velle). But “all human beings” must include those who are already happy: what is the content of this group’s wanting? Augustine claims that when the happy want to be happy, their wanting amounts to a wanting not to be unhappy. This involves wanting to avoid all kinds of bad events that would diminish or end their happiness. But death is surely such a bad event. Therefore the happy want to never die, which amounts to a desire to be (literally) immortal. “Therefore,” Augustine concludes, “everyone who

¹²Nussbaum 1994, 203, 211.
¹³This argument is elaborated by Nussbaum 1994, 225: “Our finitude, and in particular our mortality, which is a particularly central case of our finitude, and which conditions our awareness of other limits, is a constitutive factor in all valuable things’ having for us the value that in fact they have.” Nussbaum’s position is criticized by Fischer 2006.
¹⁴In making this claim, Augustine is following not Plato but probably Cicero’s lost protreptic dialogue the Hortensius (cf. De trinitate XIV.9.12).
truly either is or desires to be happy wants to be immortal.” There is even more: given that “someone who does not have what they want does not live happily,” it results that “life could in no way be truly happy unless it is everlasting.”

Recall that Diotima claimed merely that wanting happiness entails also wanting immortality. This desire is tragic to the extent that humans cannot enjoy literal immortality; on the other hand, however, at least some people (philosophers) may well achieve an existence that could be called (legitimately if homonymously) immortal, while substitutes (children, fame, and so on) are available for the rest. Augustine, by contrast, makes the much stronger claim that, since desires that are rational and natural yet unfulfilled preclude happiness, happiness in fact requires literal immortality. Thus in entertaining the possibility that human nature is not capable of being immortal, he is contemplating a state of affairs that would be tragic in a much deeper sense. Happiness in this life is only “feigned” (fingitur), he says, “as long as immortality is despaired of, without which true happiness (vera beatitudo) cannot exist” (XIII.8.11). But Augustine does not think that this tragic state of affairs actually holds:

It is no small question whether human nature is capable of that which it nonetheless claims is desirable. But with the faith (fides) that is in those to whom Jesus gave the power to be made children of god, it is no question at all. Barely a few of those who tried to discover these things through human arguments (humanis argumentationibus)—although they were gifted with great talent, had plenty of leisure, and were trained in the most subtle forms of learning—were able to reach the investigation of the immortality of the soul alone (ad indagandam solius animae immortalitatem peruenire potuerunt). … But this faith promises that the whole human being, which consists of soul and body, will be immortal and thus truly happy, not on the basis of human argument but by divine authority. (XIII.9.12)

Human nature, Augustine claims, is capable of immortality, as his Christian religion says. He here agrees with the philosophers of the past that the soul is immortal, and he seems at least open to the possibility that this can be shown through human argument. But the immortality guaranteed by faith is in any case better, because it pertains to both soul and body (by the doctrine of the resurrection) and because it has no need of support from human argument at all (non argumentatione humana sed divina auctoritate).
Let us examine in conclusion one much later text that demonstrates the influence of Augustine and thus indirectly of Plato. This is the peculiar treatment of human immortality by the medieval Franciscan philosopher John Duns Scotus (1266-1308 CE) in his so-called *Ordinatio*, formally a commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Scotus is giving his answer to the question of “whether it can be known through natural reason that there will be a general resurrection of mankind.” Notice first of all that what is at issue is not *whether* humanity will be resurrected after death (Scotus maintains that it will be), nor whether we can *know* this (he says that we can and do), but whether we can know this by reason alone, without recourse to divine revelation.

Following the conventional structure of a medieval scholastic question, Scotus begins by quoting authorities that seem to support either side of the issue; the thirteenth book of Augustine’s *De trinitate* is used for both sides. As his second authority in favor of a positive answer, Scotus cites first Aristotle for the view that all humans desire happiness, then Augustine for the argument that happiness requires immortality. Then, as his first authority in favor of a negative answer, Scotus cites the passage from the ninth chapter of *De trinitate* just quoted above, reading Augustine’s comment that “barely a few...were able to reach the investigation of the immortality of the soul alone” in a pessimistic way, suggesting that the philosophers of the past in question did not succeed in demonstrating their position on the basis of natural reason alone.

Scotus’s own response to the question is long and elaborate, involving a wide range of arguments taken from classical, scriptural, patristic, and Arabic sources. He breaks the issue down into three sub-questions to which he replies separately: [1] whether the intellective soul is the specific form of the human being, [2] whether the intellective soul is incorruptible, [3] whether the specific form of the human being will remain forever outside of a human...
being (i.e. a soul-body composite).\textsuperscript{17} The formulations are Aristotelian (the details need not concern us), but [2] corresponds roughly to the Platonic doctrine of the immortality of the soul and [3] to the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body.

As for [1], Scotus thinks it can be known by natural reason: in fact, he says, “no notable philosopher can be found who denies it, except that accursed Averroes” (\textit{ille maledictus Averroes}), such that “one who errs in this way must be expelled from the community of human beings who use reason.”\textsuperscript{18} As for [2] and [3], however, Scotus concludes that they “not sufficiently known by natural reason, although there are some probable persuasive arguments (\textit{persuasiones probabiles}) in their favor,” with those in favor of [2] being “more numerous and more probable,” but still neither demonstrative nor necessary.\textsuperscript{19} Scotus thus puts the Platonist doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body on the same epistemological footing.

I leave aside here the complex considerations that lead Scotus to deny that the soul can be known to be immortal. Near the end of his answer to the entire question, Scotus responds (again following the conventional structure) to the authorities cited at the beginning against the view that he eventually arrives at. His answer to Augustine’s claim that happiness requires immortality is subtle.\textsuperscript{20} Scotus references Aristotle’s view that the highest form of happiness available to humans is found in theoretical contemplation (cf. \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} X.6-8) and points out, correctly, that Aristotle is here speaking of a kind of happiness achievable in this life, which coexists with other, lesser needs for things like food, companionship, etc. Although Scotus disagrees with Aristotle—in fact, the highest form of happiness is found in the perfect and eternal contemplation of god, which is \textit{not} available in this life—Scotus thinks that the Aristotelian view is the one reached by natural reason.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[17] Wolter 1987, 137.
\item[18] Wolter 1987, 138, 156.
\end{footnotes}
The result is that we do not have natural knowledge of the highest form of happiness; our ultimate end is revealed only by faith. Once this is conceded, however, Augustine’s argument that happiness requires immortality collapses:

When you prove by the argument of Augustine that happiness cannot exist unless it is eternal, the one who holds that human happiness is possible in this life will reply that he is willing to lose it, since he must, according to right reason, want what is the condition of his own nature. But right reason shows, as it seems to him while he does not have faith, that mortality, of soul as much as of body, is the condition of his own nature.

The conclusion that, on the basis of reason alone, we must want to die sounds odd. Yet it seems correct that, if reason tells us that our end can be achieved in this life and that immortality is not possible for us, then pace Diotima there is no reason why we should want immortality. It is better for us not to have a tragically unfulfilled wish that will impede our achieving happiness now.

For Scotus, of course, what natural reason tells us is not the whole story. He concludes:

From these things it is clear how grateful we should be to our creator, who made us through faith most certain (per fidem certissimos) about those matters that relate to our end and to eternal perpetuity, with regard to which the most ingenious and learned men could achieve practically nothing through natural reason, according to how Augustine says in the ninth chapter of the thirteenth book of De trinitate that “barely a few,” etc.

Scotus’s modesty here about the power of reason to establish the claims of Christian doctrine is of course more the exception than the rule in medieval philosophy. Paradoxically, even this pessimistic verdict on the power of philosophy to describe our postmortem destiny and the ultimate purpose of our existence is reached only as the result of a series of complex and erudite philosophical arguments. Furthermore, despite philosophy’s limits, immortality remains a matter of certain knowledge on the basis of faith. In these respects, Scotus remains within the limits of by the Platonic heritage to which he takes a critical stance. The case

\[^{21}\text{Wolter 1987, 161.}\]

\[^{22}\text{Wolter 1987, 162.}\]
of Scotus shows how, even in those clear-eyed enough to see the limits of *logos*, the “longing for immortality” kindled by Plato could still burn.
Appendix 1:

The Argument Against Atheism in Laws X (891b-899d)

This appendix analyzes the Athenian Stranger’s complex argument against atheism (the positive denial of the existence of a god or gods) in the tenth book of the Laws; it should supplement and support my remarks about Laws X in § 2.3 and § 4.4. This argument is one of the most detailed treatments of soul in the Platonic corpus. Tellingly, immortality is not mentioned explicitly, and the way in which soul is characterized might in fact seem to preclude immortality in the literal sense.

It must be kept in mind throughout that the argument against atheism is (the first and longest) part of the “prelude” to the law on impiety. This prelude has multiple different audiences, including both the Athenian’s two actual interlocutors, Kleinias and Megillus, who are conservative and philosophically unsophisticated, and young men in the future city of Magnesia, who have fallen under the putatively pernicious influence of pre-Socratic natural science. The passage thus turns out to be extremely important for understanding Plato’s views not just on soul but also concerning the relationship between philosophical argumentation and religious belief in general.

\^23\textsuperscript{For more detail, and in some cases a different perspective, the reader should consult the most recent commentary on Laws X, Mayhew 2008, to which I am in debt throughout. England 1921 is a commentary on the entire Laws that is indispensable for linguistic issues. I will have occasion in what follows to criticize the translation of the Laws by Trevor Saunders, found in Cooper and Hutchinson 1997, which is so free as to be practically useless for the serious study of the dialogue.}
Diagnosis of the basic error behind the atheist view (891b-892c)

The Athenian claims that the atheists that he is arguing against all “consider fire and water and earth and air to be the first of all things (πρῶτα τῶν πάντων) and call these things ‘nature,’ while soul [comes] from these things later” (891c). He compares this view to a “fount of mindless opinion” that comes from “investigations about nature” (περὶ φύσεως ζητήματα). He warns that arguing against it will require some “rather unusual logoi,” but Kleinias encourages him to speak in whatever way necessary to support “the gods now spoken of according to the law” (τοῖς νῦν κατὰ νόμον λεγομένοις θεοῖς, 891d-e). Kleinias’s hope that the argument will establish the existence of the gods as described in customary cult does not, as we will see, necessarily correspond to the Athenian’s real project.

The Athenian says, is to claim that what is really “the first cause of the generation and corruption of all things” (πρῶτον γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς αἰτίων ἀπάντων) is in fact “not first, but came about later” (891e). This had led them into error “about the real being of the gods” (περὶ θεῶν τῆς ὄντως οὐσίας). The true first cause of generation, which the atheists do not recognize as such, is soul. In fact pretty much everyone is ignorant about soul, as to “what sort of thing it really is and what power it has, and in particular about its generation, that it is among the first things (ἐν πρῶτοι), having come to be before all bodies (σωμάτων ἐμπρόσθεν πάντων γενομένη), and rules more than anything else over all their [i.e. bodies’] changes and rearrangements” (892a).

The Athenian now presents a dubious inference: if soul came to be prior to body, then “necessarily the things related to soul (τὰ ψυχῆς συγγενῆ) would have come to be prior to the things belonging to body” (892b). The things related to soul—things like “opinion and care and intellect and art and law”—would thus be prior to “hard and soft things or heavy and light things.” This does not follow: soul’s alleged temporal priority over body need not extend to everything related to soul.24 (Imagine that two sisters both have children, but the younger sister happens to have hers first. The older sister thus came to be before the

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24 As Mayhew 2008, 103 points out.
younger, but the things related to the younger sister came to be before the things related to the older.) In speaking of “things related to soul” the Athenian does not seem to have in mind higher-level metaphysical entities (like the Forms, to which the human soul is said to be “related” in the Phaedo, but which play little role in the Laws) but rather activities and powers of the human soul itself.

This alleged mistake on the part of the atheists leads them to misuse the term “nature.” The Athenian apparently agrees with the atheists that whatever is or comes to be first, as opposed to what comes to be later, should be called nature or natural. The natural and the non-natural can thus be situated together on a temporal spectrum with respect to their origin. The atheists think that the first things are bodies, and that soul and the things related to it, like art and intellect, then come about from bodies; thus bodies like earth and fire are most natural. But in fact, the Athenian insists, the products of art and intellect are “among the first things” (ἐν πρώτοις, 892b). So “if soul is clearly first, not fire or air, since soul came to be among the first things (ἐν πρώτοις γεγενημένη), then it would be pretty much most correct to say that soul is especially by nature” (892c).

The Stranger emphasizes that this holds only “if someone shows that soul is older (πρεσβυτέραν) than body, but otherwise not at all” (892c). The stakes attached to the priority of soul over body have thus been made clear, but actually establishing this priority remains as a task for what follows. Before proceeding to this, let us here dwell on two problematic features of the view that the Athenian has endorsed.

First, soul here is repeatedly said to have come to be. This accords with the literal content of the “creation story” in the Timaeus, but contradicts the proof of the immortality of the soul in the Phaedrus, where Socrates claims that “since soul is an ungenerated thing (ἀγένητον), it must be incorruptible (ἀδιάφθορον) as well” (245d). If soul is generated, then

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25 The appearance of νοῦς here in the list of things related to soul, alongside δόξα, τέχνη, etc., seems to pose a problem for the attractive thesis of Menn (1993) that νοῦς for Plato is god, an entity independent of and higher than soul. Menn says that the “theology of the Laws is supposed to be general and popular, and Plato tries to avoid controversy about the status of particular divine principles” (p. 36); perhaps it is fair to say that Laws X neither rules out nor supports Menn’s view.
it would seem that it is also either at least potentially destructible (so Timaeus) or actually
to be destroyed at some point (so Aristotle). Here in the *Laws* the second option seems more
likely, as there does not appear to be any cosmic craftsman who oversees the generation of
soul and could guarantee its perpetual existence. The view that soul is generated also sets
up a conflict with the claim that it is “the first cause of the generation and corruption of
all things.” How can the soul be the first cause of generation if it itself is generated? The
obvious answer is that soul must be self-generated, but at this point, at least, no such idea
has been introduced, nor is it clearly a coherent one.

Second, the Athenian emphasizes that soul came to be before “all bodies,” in particular
before air and fire, thus ruling out the main pre-Socratic views about the composition of
soul. Soul is not, however, explicitly said to be “incorporeal” (ἀσώματος), a word that does
not occur in *Laws* X at all. It is thus possible that soul here is not thought of as incorporeal
in a strict sense, but rather that it is not made up of any of the four basic elements, here
referred to simply as “bodies” (cf. § 2.4). The Athenian does not insist that soul came to
be before absolutely everything else. Rather, he says twice that it came to be “among the
first things” (ἐν πρώτοις), a category into which he also places “the great and first works and
actions of art” (892b). What other sorts of things could be coeval with soul (or even prior to
it, having either come to be earlier or simply always existed)?

The obvious possibility is some kind of “prime matter” that is perhaps in motion, but not yet organized into the four
basic bodies. Precisely this idea is found in the *Timaeus* (first hinted at 30a, then discussed
at length from 48e-53a), but is never put forward in the *Laws*.

**Crossing the river and the classification of motions (892d-894a)**

Before beginning with the actual argument, the Athenian offers a strange and ominous
warning to his interlocutors: “Let us guard against an entirely deceitful *logos,*” he says, “lest

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26 The importance of this point is emphasized by Menn 1995, 75n5. Again, however, nothing in the text
directly suggests that the Athenian is holding out the specific possibility of “intellect” (*νοῦς*) existing prior
to soul.

it, being suitable for youths, lead astray (παραπείσῃ) us who are old, and getting away from us make us ridiculous, such that we should seem to aim at greater things but fail at even the small ones” (892d). If, the Athenian suggests, the three of them needed to cross a river with a strong current, it would be a good idea for him to leave Kleinias and Megillus “in safety” (ἐν ἀσφαλεί) and try to cross himself, in order to see if it was crossable for the old (892e). If it was, he could help them across with his experience; if not, they would not be put in danger. This scenario is a metaphor for their situation in the arguing against the atheists:

“Now too the logos at hand is rather intense (σφοδρότερος) and perhaps pretty much uncrossable for your strength. Lest it fill you with dizziness and vertigo as it sweeps along, asking you questions when you are not used to answering, and produce an unpleasant lack of grace and appropriateness, it seems to me that we should do the same thing now: I should first question myself, while you listen in safety, and then I in turn will give the answers and go through the whole logos like that, until we have finished with soul and shown that it is prior to body.” (892e-893a)

Kleinias and Megillus are inexperienced with philosophical argumentation (being in this representative of most ordinary people), and it would be embarrassing and unseemly for them to try to answer difficult questions and risk getting confused. It is left open whether they will at least be able to follow the argument as listeners (the Athenian will help them to “cross the river”) or will just be totally lost (the river is simply uncrossable for them).

This use of the need for safety in a nautical context as a metaphor for dealing with arguments is reminiscent of a passage in the Phaedo, where Simmias declares that if finding out the truth about the soul is impossible, one should at least “take hold of the best and hardest to refute among human logoi, and being carried on this as if on a raft, sail through life taking this risk—unless one can travel more safely and less riskily on a more secure vessel (ἄσφαλέστερον καὶ ἀκινδυνότερον ἐπὶ βεβαιοτέρου ὀχήματος), some divine logos” (85c-d). The safer thing, Simmias here revealingly suggests, would be to rely on a divine logos rather than a human one, i.e. on religious revelation as opposed to a philosophical argument subject to refutation. Kleinias and Megillus may ultimately be suited only for the former, safer path. By

28 As Mayhew 2008, 105 points out.
contrast, the Athenian is “the youngest” of the three and “experienced with many currents” (πολλῶν ἐμπειρός ῥευμάτων, 892d). There is, in other words, a certain kinship between the Athenian and the “young man” who is the putative target of the prelude; the image of the river and its flow also evokes a connection with the views of Heraclitus (cf. Cratylus 402a), one of the thinkers who has ostensibly influenced the young man.

In this light, one might wonder: what precisely is the “entirely deceitful logos” (παντάπασιν ἀπατηλὸν λόγον) that the Athenian is warning against (892d)? Mayhew takes it to refer to the argument of the atheists, but the Athenian is about to introduce his own argument, rather than engage in detail with that of his opponents. Saunders instead translates the phrase as “an extremely tricky argument,” such that it seems to refer forward to the argument that the Athenian is about to make for theism, but this does not capture the negative force of ἀπατηλός. On either view the point of next phrase is obscure: “such that we should seem to aim at greater things but failing at even the small ones.” Mayhew takes it to mean “trying to argue for theism but not assigning the right person to do it,” but this seems forced. More likely, “greater things” refers to the establishment of Magnesia in general and the attempt to guarantee its stability against the threat of impiety; the “small things” would then be the arguments against atheism. Taken together, these ambiguities suggest that the Athenian could be hinting that his own argument is a deceptive rhetorical device in the service of what is politically expedient.

In the rest of this section the Athenian accordingly engages in a dialogue with himself. Formally speaking, this situation is paralleled elsewhere in Plato only once in the Gorgias, where Socrates questions himself after Callicles refuses to answer (501c-506c). The Athenian first asks himself whether [1] everything is at rest, [2] everything is in motion, or [3] some things are in motion and some are at rest. He answers [3], thus rejecting, as Mayhew says, both the Eleatic and the Heraclitean positions.

Motion and rest, the Athenian further says,

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29 Mayhew 2008, 104. That the argument is called “suitable for youths” (νεοπρεπής) does not decide the issue, since the logos held by the youths and the one addressed to them could both be so described.

30 The other occurrences in Plato are all negative: Cratylus 408a, Gorgias 465b, Critias 107d.

are both “in some place” (ἐν χώρᾳ τινί). He then offers a very obscure catalogue of at least eight different kinds of motion: rotation (motion in one place), locomotion (motion in many places, either by gliding or rolling), combination, separation, growth, shrinking, generation, and decay. The details of this difficult list are not important for present purposes, but notice the concluding account of generation:

“From what experience (πάθος) does the generation of all things (πάντων γένεσις) come about? Clearly, it’s whenever a principle (ἀρχή), receiving growth, comes to the second transition (μετάβασιν) and from this to the next, and upon reaching three has perception for perceivers. Everything comes to be by changing and shifting in this way, and it is really being (ἐστιν ὄντως ὄν) as long it is remains, but when it changes to another state it is entirely corrupted.” (894a)

The Athenian seems to be claiming that all generation (thus including the generation of soul?) proceeds from basic geometrical entities. On the most obvious reading, the principle is a point, and the three transitions mentioned are expansions to a line, a surface, and finally a three-dimension object. This is broadly reminiscent of the generation of solids in the Timaeus from geometrical shapes.\(^\text{32}\) As in the Timaeus, the division between what is corporeal and incorporeal seems to disappear at the lowest ontological level.

Self-movers as first movers (894b-895b)

The Athenian says that all types of motion have now been identified, except for two:

ATHENIAN: Let there be one motion that is always able to move other things (ἕτερα δυναμένη κινεῖν) yet unable to move itself, but another one among all the motions that is always able to move itself and other things, in combinations and separations, and in growth and its opposite, and in generation and decay.

KLEINIAS: Let it be so.

ATHENIAN: The one that always moves another thing and is itself changed by something else we will set down as the ninth, while the one that moves itself and another thing, being fitted to all actions and affections, which is really called the change and motion of all beings, we will say this is pretty much the tenth. (894b-c)

\(^{32}\)The interesting attempt by Mayhew 2008, 115-116 to interpret the three stages here in light of how shapes combine in the Timaeus seems to me unsuccessful, however. Besides a general lack of explicit textual support, his view faces the problem that things only become perceptible after an implicit fourth change or stage, in which many of the geometric forms accumulate together.
The Athenian says that these two kinds of motion ought to be considered the first two kinds, rather than the last. It seems that previous eight motions must be types or instances of the motion that moves another thing but not itself, although the Athenian's wording and his counting of these two new motions alongside the prior eight to make a total of ten admittedly discourage this attractive reading.

The Athenian then offers two arguments for the priority of the motion able to move itself.

1. “Whenever one thing changes another, and this thing always some other thing, of all such things will there be some first thing that changes? And how, whenever it is moved by something else, will it ever be the first of the things that are altered? It’s impossible. But whenever something moving itself by itself alters something else, and this other thing something else, and in this way from a thousand things moved there come to be tens of thousands, will there be any beginning (ἀρχή) of all their motion other than the change of that [motion] that has moved itself?” (894e-895a)

2. “If all things should stand still, having come to be in one place (ὁμοῦ γενόμενα), just as most of such people dare to say, what motion of those we have spoken of would necessarily have to come to be among them first? Surely the motion moving itself by itself. For it would never begin to change because of something else before it, since there is no change in these things before it. So the beginning (ἀρχήν) of all motions, and the first to come to be among things at rest, and the one that moves itself among things in motion, we will say is necessarily the eldest and most powerful (πρεσβυτάτην καὶ κρατίστην) change of all, and second is what is altered by another but moves other things.” (895a-b)

In [1] the Athenian claims that there cannot be an infinite regress of motion and change; some motion must be first, and this can only be a self-mover. The impossibility of an infinite regress, which is only asserted as a premise in [1], is then defended in [2], but only in an ad hominem way against any particular pre-Socratic thinkers (perhaps Anaxagoras) who posit some initial state of complete rest for the cosmos: how could motion have come to be from this situation without a self-mover?

The second part of the argument for the immortality of the soul in the Phaedrus (245c-246a, cf. § 3.3) similarly attempts to establish soul as a first mover in the cosmos. In comparison with that passage, it is striking that the Athenian here does not try to defend

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33England [192]. II.469 suggests that the ten “are not parallel homogeneous classes or kinds, but a set of dichotomies, such as Plato loves, some of which include all the others.”

34In this passage the Athenian seems to use κίνησις, μεταβολή, and ἀλλοίωσις completely interchangeably.
the claim that soul will never stop moving or living. I cannot give any further criticism of his argument here, despite its great historical importance. It was surely the inspiration for Aristotle’s argument for a first mover in the cosmos—but an unmoved mover, not a self-mover (cf. Physics VIII.6, Metaphysics Α.7)—which in turn inspired the first of the quinque viae of Thomas Aquinas for proving the existence of god (cf. Summa Theologiae I.2.3) and in general all cosmological arguments of this type.

Connection to soul (895c-896d)

The Athenian gets Kleinias to volunteer that when self-motion is observed in any body, the thing is said to be alive (895c). But things are also said to be alive “when we see soul in them” (ὁπόταν ψυχὴν ἐν τισιν ὁρῶμεν). The latter is of course a paradoxical expression, since soul is invisible to human sight. The point, at any rate, is to suggest an analytic connection between soul, life, and self-motion—an idea that the Athenian then proceeds to express in a more elaborate way. He claims that “about each thing” (περὶ ἕκαστον) there are three things that we want to know: the being (οὐσία), the logos of the being, and the name (895d).

Given this, we can ask two sorts of questions: either we give the name and ask for the logos (as in a Socratic search for definitions), or give the logos and ask for the name. The Athenian employs the latter, reverse Socratic procedure, asking for the logos for that of which “soul” is the name:

Athenian: That for which psukhe is the name, what is its logos? Can we say anything other than what was just said, the motion that is itself able to move itself (τὴν δυναμόναυν αὐτήν αὐτήν καὶ ἄλλον κάνειν)?

Kleinias: You’re saying that this same being (οὐσίαν) that we all call by the name of psukhe has the logos of moving itself (τὸ ἑαυτὸ καὶ ἄλλον λόγον ἔχειν)?

Athenian: I do say so. If this is the case, then must we still be longing for more? Has it not been sufficiently shown that soul is the same as the first generation and motion of the things that are and that have come to be and that will be, and of all the opposites of these, since it has come to light as the cause of all change and motion for all things?

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35 This passage is reminiscent of an ontological digression in the Seventh Letter, where a five-part scheme is developed involving the name, the logos, the image, knowledge, and the thing itself (342a-343e, cf. Mayhew 2008, 126-128). Note that the author of the Seventh Letter does not use the term ὀσία.
KLEINIAS: No, it has been most sufficiently shown (ἵκανώτατα δέδεικται) that soul is the oldest of all things (τῶν πάντων πρεσβυτάτη), having come to be (γενομένη) as the origin of motion. (895e-896b)

In what follows, the Athenian emphasizes (and Kleinias agrees) that “soul has come to be prior to body (προτέραν γεγονέναι σώματος), body second and later, with soul ruling and body being ruled, according to nature” (896b-c). Since soul is older (πρεσβυτέρα) than body, the things belonging to soul are older than those belonging to body (896c-d).

Two points should be made about this section. First, the notion that soul is a self-mover (as opposed to, say, an unmoved mover) is only asserted, rather than really argued for. Second, the Athenian portrays the soul as itself motion (κίνησις) and generation (γένεσις).

Kleinias, perhaps significantly, does not follow the Athenian in this, preferring to call the soul an origin or principle of motion (ἀρχὴ κινήσεως). The view that the soul is pure motion is not found elsewhere in the Platonic corpus. It would seem that motion requires a body.\footnote{Cf. Aristotle, \textit{De caelo} 279a15-16: “There is no movement without a natural body”.

\footnote{So apparently Carone 2003, 182: “Soul itself is a self-mover, but since motion takes place in space, soul is some kind of spatial and thus physical entity; the way it must be distinguished from body is by initiating causal chains instead of being a mere effect of them.”}

Perhaps we should take what the Athenian says as a somewhat misleading way of putting the view that the soul is a corporeal or quasi-corporeal thing (which as such can in motion)—approximately the view found in the \textit{Phaedo} or the \textit{Timaeus}. Otherwise, the Athenian’s view would seem to be that soul is simply the movement in the bodies that make up the cosmos.

If the latter is right, then it would seem that the priority of soul over body cannot be understood in a purely temporal sense, as is suggested by the Athenian’s use of language like “older” (πρεσβυτέρα) and “having come to be before” (ἐμπροσθεν γεγομένη). In the \textit{Timaeus}, Timaeus likewise apologizes for speaking about soul after body, when in fact soul is “in both generation and in excellence prior and older than body” (καὶ γενέσει καὶ ἀρετῇ προτέραν καὶ πρεσβυτέραν σώματος, 34b-35a). Instead, this temporal language must have a metaphorical significance. In \textit{Metaphysics} Δ.11, Aristotle identifies a variety of senses of priority and
posteriority, of which the temporal sense is just one. The basic sense, he suggests, is in fact that “according to nature and substance” (κατὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐσίαν), according to which the prior can exist without the posterior, but not the posterior without the prior (1019a1-4). Aristotle adds that this is “a distinction that Plato used.”

A good soul manages the universe (896d-898c)

Soul, the Athenian claims, is the cause of all things—including things both good and bad, beautiful and ugly, just and unjust—by being present in and managing everything that moves, including the heavens (896d-e). “One soul or many?” he then suddenly asks. "Many. I will answer for you. Let us set down no less than two, one that does good and one that is able to accomplish the opposite” (896e). This is the first reference in the argument to souls as opposed to soul in general, apparently understood as a mass term, and even here the Athenian is not really concerned with individual souls (or with determining a precise number of them). What is important is that there are two basic types of soul, with at least one instance of each type: one does only good, while the other is able to do bad. Presumably, “bad” soul is not anything like a “devil” or principle of evil in the cosmos, but rather the type of soul possessed by humans and animals, which possesses the freedom to do evil.

Athenian next poses the question of which kind of soul is in control of the heavenly motions (897b-c). If the heavens “have a nature similar to (ὁμοίαν) the motion and revolution and calculations of intellect (νοῦ) and proceed in a related way” (συγγενῶς), then it is the good soul that is in control of them, but if the heavens move “in a mad and disorderly way,” then it is the bad (897c-d). So what nature does the motion of intellect have? This, the Athenian says, is a hard question. They must take care not to try to answer it by, as it were, looking directly at the sun and being blinded, “as if we could see and know intellect with mortal eyes” (897d). It is safer (ἀσφαλέστερον), he says, to look at an image (εἰκόνα) of what

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38 Cf. Robinson 1995, 147: “It is fairly clear that so far the only soul under discussion has been soul-in-general, perhaps better translated as soul-stuff or psychic force. There has been no indication that it is particular or personal.”

is asked about (897e). Intellect, he claims, “resembles” (προσέοικεν) rotational motion in one place (897e-898b). But the motion of the heavenly bodies is of course (primarily) circular. “From what’s now been said,” exclaims Kleinias, “it’s not pious (ὅσιον) to say something else than that one soul, or several, having complete virtue” are responsible for the heavenly motions (898c).

**How does soul move the sun? (898d-899a)**

The Athenian then brings up the invisibility of soul in both mortal animals and celestial bodies, a point familiar from the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus*:

> “Every human being sees the body of the sun, but no one its soul—not that of any other body of an animal, either living or dying—but there is great hope that this kind (γένος) is naturally everywhere (περιπεφυκέναι) entirely imperceptible for us with any of the senses of the body, but is instead intelligible (νοητόν). So let us grasp the following about it with intellect and thought alone.” (898d-e)

The “great hope” (ἐλπὶς πολλή) that the Athenian alludes to has to do not primarily with the existence of soul but with our epistemological access to it: the hope is that soul is in fact intelligible to us, despite being imperceptible through the senses. The point that the Athenian then wants to grasp by intellect (rather than by empirical investigation) concerns how soul moves celestial bodies like the sun. He puts forward three options:

> “[1] Either, being inside this round, visible body, soul conveys it everywhere, in the way that the soul in us carries us around everywhere (καθάπερ ἡμᾶς ἡ παρ’ἡμῖν ψυχὴ πάντῃ περιφέρει). [2] Or, having gotten itself (πορισαμένη) a body from somewhere outside, of fire or some kind of air, as some say, it pushes body with body by force. [3] Or, third, soul is itself devoid of body (ψιλὴ σώματος), but guides the sun with some other extremely amazing powers.” (898e-899a)

The Athenian does not move to decide the matter, and scholars disagree about which (if any) of the three options represent Plato’s own view. Jaeger thought that [3], here left
particularly vague, could be a reference to Aristotle’s idea of the unmoved mover as a final cause.\footnote{Jaeger 1923, 144; cf. Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics} Λ.7, 1072b3: \textit{καὶ δὴ ὡς ἐρῶμεν.}} In any case, the Athenian clearly identifies [1] with how the soul moves the human body; he is reticent merely about whether soul also moves the cosmic bodies in the same way. On [1], soul is inside (ἐνοῦσα ἐντός, 898e8) the body, and this is supposed to make clear the interaction of the two. Whether or not this is a satisfactory answer to the “mind-body problem,” the fact that Plato held such a view does explain why he would not hold that the human soul is strictly incorporeal, even while denying that it is composed of earth, water, air, or fire. This is perhaps the only Platonic passage that could legitimately be taken to support the Platonist doctrine of the soul-vehicle (cf. § \footnote{Jaeger 1923, 144; cf. Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics} Λ.7, 1072b3: \textit{καὶ δὴ ὡς ἐρῶμεν.}} 2.5), although only with respect to celestial (as opposed to human) bodies.\footnote{Jaeger 1923, 144; cf. Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics} Λ.7, 1072b3: \textit{καὶ δὴ ὡς ἐρῶμεν.}}

**Final conclusion, connection to gods (899a-d)**

The Athenian then abruptly announces that the soul that moves the sun (however it does so) must be considered to be a god, and likewise for all the other heavenly bodies:

“So concerning all the stars and the moon, and the years and months and all the seasons, what else shall we say than this, that since soul or souls have come to light as the causes of all these things, and are good with respect to every virtue, we will say they are gods, whether they order the whole heaven by being in bodies as living beings (ζῴα), or however and whatever way it is. Could anyone agree to these things yet hold that all things are not full of gods?” (899b)

The Athenian here cites the dictum of the pre-Socratic Thales that “all things are full of gods” (cf. Aristotle, \textit{De anima} 411a8). But the Athenian seems to mean the phrase in a somewhat different sense than Thales, who, according to Aristotle, thought that soul was “mixed through the entire universe.” The sudden transition from “souls” to “gods” is jarring.\footnote{Jaeger 1923, 144; cf. Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics} Λ.7, 1072b3: \textit{καὶ δὴ ὡς ἐρῶμεν.}}
Not all souls count as gods, of course: only those that do only good and that are responsible for moving the heavenly bodies. The souls that move human bodies, for instance, and that are capable of doing evil, are not gods. Nonetheless, the gods and human souls are in some way on the same ontological level. To what extent these celestial souls correspond to the gods of traditional cult is moreover left entirely unexplored. With this, the argument against the atheist is complete.

**Looking back from Book XII (966c-968b)**

Shortly before the very end of the *Laws*, in Book XII, the Athenian offers a retrospective summary of the conclusions of the argument against atheism in Book X. This later passage is interesting for our purposes for two reasons. First, by emphasizing the need for trust in certain theological theses as a foundation for religious piety, it calls into question the status of the arguments offered in Book X. Second, it contains one of the very few references in the *Laws* to the immortality of the soul, an idea at most only implied in Book X itself.

The Athenian has been describing the “more exact education” that will be required of Magnesia’s guardians, the members of the so-called Nocturnal Council, in order to make them “able to look to one form (μίαν ἰδέαν) out of many dissimilar things” (965b-c). This passage is the only apparent allusion to the Forms in the *Laws*. Their metaphysical status (i.e. do they exist separately?) is left unspecified; Kleinias and Megillus are perhaps not themselves eligible for the education that they approve of. Another one of the most important topics for the guardians to learn about, the Athenian then adds, is what concerns the divine. “Most of those in the city must be forgiven for only following the tradition of the laws (τῇ φήμῃ τῶν νόμων), but guardianship must be entrusted only to those who have labored to obtain

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46 Particularly interesting is also 966a5-b3, where the Athenian asks whether “concerning the beautiful and the good” the guardians must not be able to see how these are both one and many (cf. *Philebus* 15a-c), and further not just be able to “conceive” (ἐννοεῖν) of this, but also “offer a display of this in speech” (τὴν ἔνδειξιν τῷ λόγῳ ἐνδείκνυσθαι). Compare my remarks in § 5.3.
every form of trust (πᾶσαν πίστιν λαβεῖν) that there is about the gods,” he says (966c).\footnote{This sentence is of course very damaging to the overall interpretation of the Laws advanced by Bobonich 2002—who neglects to quote or discuss it.}

He now refers back to the discussion in Book X:

_Athenian:_ Don’t we know that there are two things leading to trust (ἄγοντε εἰς πίστιν) about the gods, which we went over earlier?

_Kleinius:_ What things?

_Athenian:_ One is what we said about the soul, that it is the oldest and most divine of all things of which the motion, having received its generation, has provided ever-flowing being. The second concerns the orderliness of the movement (τὴν φοράν, ὡς ἔχει τάξεως) of the stars and everything else controlled by intellect, which has arranged the universe (τὸ πᾶν διακεκοσμηκώς). (966d-e)

Even the guardians (the city’s elite that receives the best education) are not to have knowledge but rather trust about the gods (cf. § 6.2).\footnote{It might seem appropriate to translate πίστις in the phrase ὃς ἂν μὴ διαπονήσηται τὸ πᾶσαν πίστιν λαβεῖν τῶν οὐσῶν περὶ θεῶν (966c7-8) as “proofs,” especially in light of the plural implied in τῶν οὐσῶν. But this meaning of πίστις is not securely attested in Plato at all, and just a few lines later at 966d7 (quoted above), the word must mean “trust.” If Plato intended for the Athenian to mean that the guardians must master certain arguments, he could have made this much clearer by using a different term (e.g. ἀπόδειξις).}

This trust is supposed to rest on two specific convictions allegedly discussed earlier.

The first is that soul the oldest and most divine (πρεσβύτατόν τε καὶ θειότατόν) among generated things that have “ever-flowing being” (ἀέναον οὐσίαν).\footnote{The admittedly confusing Greek is often misconstrued: πρεσβύτατον τε καὶ θειότατον ἐστιν πάντων ὧν κίνησις γένεσιν παραλαβοῦσα ἀέναον οὐσίαν ἐπόρισεν. Contra England 1921, II.631, here the genitive plural after a superlative adjective is partitive, as often elsewhere in the passages we have been discussing, rather than a genitive of comparison, with the superlative used in place of the comparative. (On the linguistic point, cf. Hackforth 1936, 5.) The translation by Saunders reflects England’s interpretation: “soul...is far older and far more divine than all those things whose movements have sprung up and provided the impulse which has plunged it into a perpetual stream of existence.” An accurate translation is given by Menn 1995, 35.}

The term “ever-flowing” is ambiguous: does it suggest an everlasting existence or an existence that is always in flux?\footnote{The word ἀέναος is poetic. Heraclitus uses the word once, in the phrase κλέος ἀέναον θητῶν (fr. 29 Diels-Kranz), possibly in a derogatory sense (i.e. “transient”), though cf. Pindar, Olympian 14.12, where it is applied to τιμή. It occurs elsewhere in Plato only once, applied to the rivers of the underworld in the Phaedo (111d); cf. Hesiod, Works and Days 737 for the same phrase.}

The second point, that intellect (νοῦς) is responsible for the order (τάξις) of the heavenly bodies was made at most obliquely in Book X (897b1-3). Most people, the Athenian continues, think that astronomy and in general the investigation of the natural world lead to atheism, but this is not true. The accusation that
philosophers are atheists, made especially by poets, is an unfair extrapolation from the position of certain—but not all—pre-Socratic thinkers. In fact the effect of philosophy is quite the opposite of what the many suppose:

“It is impossible for any mortal human being ever to become securely god-revering (βεβαίως θεοσεβῆ), who does not grasp these two things that have been said, not only that the soul is the oldest of all things that take part in birth (πρεσβύτατον ἁπάντων ὅσα γονῆς μετείληφεν), and immortal (ἀθάνατόν τε), and rules over all bodies, but also, in addition to these things, who grasps what has now often been said, the intellect (νοῦν) of beings, said to be in the stars, and the necessary subjects of learning prior to these. ... The one not able to acquire these things in addition to the public virtues will pretty much never be an appropriate ruler for the whole city, but rather a servant for the other rulers.” (967d-968a).

Here the Athenian Stranger reiterates the two core beliefs stated above and supposedly defended in *Laws* X, now stressing that they are in fact the foundation of lasting piety. Philosophy and civic religion are allegedly in perfect harmony. In stating the first belief, that concerning soul, he adds the notion of immortality, as if en passant. Again, the term ἀθάνατος does not in fact appear in the tenth book at all; the term ἀνώλεθρος is applied once to soul in a mythic context (903a, cf. §4.4), but no attempt is made to actually establish that the soul is either immortal or indestructible. On the contrary, the emphasis laid on the soul’s generation and the lack of emphasis on individual human souls (outside of the myth of the afterlife) might make it seem that literal immortality is actually not on the table in Book X. The apparent inaccuracy of the summary (which arguably extends to the second belief, concerning νοῦς) can be explained by the fact that the Athenian is now merely offering a superficial appeal to a philosophical justification for what are in fact socially salutary religious dogmata, adherence to which will be required of the city’s rulers.

51 I do not translate 967e2-968a1, the first part of which is impossible for me to understand.
53 At 967c-d there occurs one of the only two instances in the *Laws* of the term “philosophy” (the other is at 857d; in both cases in fact a form of the verb φιλοσοφεῖν is used).
Appendix 2:

Greek and Latin Terminology for Immortality

Plato’s usual word for “immortal,” ἀθάνατος (literally, “deathless”), appears some two hundred times in the Homeric epics, almost always to refer to the gods. Homer elsewhere refers to the Olympians as the “blessed gods who are always” (μάκαρες θεοί αἰὲν ἐόντες, Iliad XXIV.99, Odyssey V.7, etc.), suggesting that by ἀθάνατος he means to refer to an existence that is both blessed and everlasting. Technically speaking, of course, Homer’s gods were born and thus are not truly eternal, but they are in a broader sense exempt from human finitude (nine times in the epics ἀθανάτος is paired with ἀγήραος, “ageless”). Rarer in Homer are ἀμβρότος or ἀμβρόσιος (etymological cognates of “immortal”); these poetic words are never used by Plato.

Given how Plato’s Socrates repeatedly defines death as the separation or release of the soul from the body (cf. Phaedo 64c, 67d), the term ἀθάνατος seems poorly chosen to express immortality in the literal sense. For the soul is certainly separated from the body, and in this sense does experience death; on the other hand, soul-body compounds, not souls on their own, are the kind of things that actually die. Therefore it might seem trivially and analytically true that the soul either is or is not immortal in the sense of “not undergoing death,” depending on how one specifies the terms, with no implications for the soul’s own postmortem survival. This problem explains the appeal of alternative terminology that
could refer more unambiguously to psychic imperishability, e.g. ἀνώλεθρος (“indestructible”) or ἀφθαρτος (“incorruptible”).

The term ἀνώλεθρος appears just once in extant Greek texts prior to Plato, in the poem of Parmenides, where what is is said to be ἀγένητον καὶ ἀνώλεθρον (fr. 8.3 Diels-Kranz). Almost the same doublet is used by Plato once, in the Timaeus, where the Forms are said to be ἀγένητον καὶ ἀνώλεθρον (52a). In the Laws, both soul and body are said to have been “generated to be indestructible, but not eternal” (ἀνώλεθρον δὲ ὃν γενόμενον, ἀλλ’ αἰώνιον, 904a8-9, cf. § 4.4). Otherwise all occurrences of ἀνώλεθρος in Plato occur in the Phaedo, where —relatively late in the dialogue—the task at hand is formulated first by Cebes then by Socrates as to show that the soul is both ἀθάνατος and ἀνώλεθρος (88b, 95c).

At Phaedo 105e, Socrates and Cebes conclude after a complex argument that “the soul does not admit death” (ψυχὴ οὐ δέχεται θάνατον) and is therefore ἀθάνατος. There follows an argument that the soul is also ἀνώλεθρος, which famously ends in a disappointing anticlimax:

Socrates: And concerning what is immortal (περὶ τοῦ ἀθανάτου), if it is agreed by us that this is also indestructible ἀνώλεθρον, then the soul would be indestructible in addition to being immortal. If not, we need another logos.

Cebes: But there’s no need of that on this account. For hardly would anything else not admit of decay (φθοράν), if the immortal, being eternal (αἰώνιον ὃν), does admit of it.

Socrates: But as for the god, I think, and the form of life itself, and anything else that is immortal, everyone would agree that it is never destroyed (μηδέποτε ἀπόλλυσθαι).

Cebes: By Zeus, I think that would be agreed by all human beings, and even more so by gods.

Socrates: Since, then, the immortal is also incorruptible (ἀδιάφθορόν), would it not be the case that the soul, if it happens to be immortal, would also be indestructible?

Cebes: That’s very necessary.

Socrates: So when death approaches the human being, it seems that what is mortal in him (τὸ θνητὸν αὐτοῦ) dies, but the immortal in him departs, safe and incorruptible (σῶν καὶ ἀδιάφθορον), yielding place to death.

54 The Stoics may have been the first to see a problem here and make relevant terminological distinctions, as Ju 2009, 118-119 argues.
55 It probably also was used in works now lost: the only appearance of the word in the genuine works of Aristotle comes in the Physics, where he attributes to “Anaximander and most of those who speak about nature” the view that the divine τὸ θεῖον is ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀνώλεθρον (203b13-15).
56 In fact only one manuscript here reads ἀγένητον rather than ἀγένητον; the former is preferred as the lectio difficilior.
Cebes: So it appears.

Socrates: So more than anything, Cebes, the soul would be immortal and indestructible, and our souls will really be in Hades. (106c-107a)

After hinting at a distinction between “immortal” and “indestructible,” Socrates then quickly concedes that the first implies the second, thus obviating the need for an argument. Although this is not the place for a detailed discussion of the passage, Socrates’s puzzling procedure obviously lends itself to an ironic reading, whereby “immortal” and “indestructible” precisely do not coincide, but rather refer to divine status and literally permanent postmortem existence for the soul, respectively. (Notice that it is Cebes, not Socrates, who volunteers the notion that the “immortal” is “eternal”—the latter word appears in the Phaedo here for the first time.)

In this argument ἀνώλεθρος is treated as synonymous with ἀδιάφθορος (106e1, e7). This latter term is also applied to the soul in the proof of immortality in the Phaedrus (245d) in apparently the same sense (it is there paired with ἀγένητος, just as ἀνώλεθρος is by Parmenides). Plato also uses ἀδιάφθορος elsewhere, as well as (twice) the closely related word ἀδιάφθαρτος, but not in contexts related to soul. He never uses the simpler form ἀφθαρτος; this word, along with the noun ἀφθαρσία, first enters the Greek lexicon with Aristotle, who uses them some ninety times. All these terms are derived from the verb (δι)φθείρειν (“to corrupt”).

The only other relevant term in Plato’s dialogues is ἀειγενής (“always coming to be”), as at Statesman 309c, where the Eleatic Stranger refers to τὸ ἀειγενές ὄν τῆς ψυχῆς. Plato’s other two uses of the term both occur in contexts where a vicarious immortality through procreation is at issue (at Symposium 206e and Laws 773e-774a). Likewise following the literal meaning, later authors typically use ἀειγενεσία to refer to an unending process of generation in the world.

57Plato never elsewhere describes the soul directly as ἄιδιος, though cf. Republic 611b (discussed in § 3.1) and Definitions 415a (Ἀθανασία οὐσία ἐμψυχος καὶ ἄιδιος μονή).
Terminological choices in the later tradition vary. Plotinus prefers ἀθάνατος (which occurs fifteen times in Ennead IV.7, while ἀφθαρτος occurs only eight times in his entire corpus and ἀνώλεθρος only twice). In Porphyry’s Starting-Points, by contrast, the soul is said to be ἀφθαρτος (17), while ἀθάνατος does not appear at all. Proclus likewise prefers the more precise terminology: in his Elements of Theology he proves that the soul is ἀνώλεθρος and ἀφθαρτος rather than “immortal” ἀθάνατος. (“Immortality” is referenced in the Elements only in Proposition 105, in a somewhat otiose explanation that it applies only to living things, unlike ἀΐδιος and ἀνώλεθρος.)

The terminological situation in Latin is far simpler. Immortalis (or inmortalis), common in all periods of the language, is the equivalent of ἀθάνατος and the usual choice in pagan philosophical writers. Incorruptibilis, equivalent to ἀφθαρτος, is found first in Tertullian (De anima 24.1) and generally replaces immortalis in medieval philosophical Latin. A different issue, peculiar to Latin, is the existence of two distinct words that can be used in place of Greek ψυχή: anima and animus. In general, the first refers to soul as source of life, the second to the mind or intellect (cf. e.g. Lucretius, De rerum natura III.35-36 and Augustine, De civitate dei VII.23, quoting Varro), but this distinction is not always maintained.
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