MOURNING SOCRATES: PLATO’S PHAEDO
AND TRAGIC PHILOSOPHY

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. . . τί νο βείομαι αἰνὰ παθου̃σα / σευ̃ ἀ ποτεθνηω̃τος;

“. . . How shall I go on living in my wretched suffering, / now that you are dead?”

—Iliad 22.431–32

PLATO’S PHAEDO HAS LONG captivated readers with its moving portrayal of
the death of Socrates, Plato’s beloved teacher and the dominating figure in
his philosophical corpus. But the philosophical significance of Socrates’
death and the source of the Phaedo’s emotional power in depicting it are rarely
considered. In this article, I want to approach the dialogue as a work of tragic
philosophy that reveals legitimate grounds for grief in the moral universe of Soc-
rates’ circle. I propose that the dialogue is a deliberately failed attempt to depict,
according to terms laid out in the Republic, a non-tragic hero and a non-tragic
death. In depicting philosophy’s failure to eliminate tragedy from the contempla-
 tive life, the dialogue itself becomes a form of tragic representation—a form
of philosophical tragedy as well as tragic philosophy. When read this way, the
Phaedo prompts us to ask ourselves why Plato would choose to memorialize
his teacher in this philosophically problematic way. I suggest one possible an-
swer in the double-edged effects of Socrates’ charismatic personality.

MOURNING IN GREEK POETRY

Greek poetry is replete with scenes of mourning, scenes that explore the effects
of death and loss on the surviving human community, and the means by which
the community reconstitutes itself and reconceives the dead. Greek poetry also
gives voice to the dead, who continue to rely on the living to give meaning to
their former lives and to secure them a peaceful, if joyless, afterlife. The evil
of death in the Greek poetic imagination stems not so much from death’s final-
ity; Hades, however grim and depressing, remains a continuation of some kind
of life. But it is a life no one would ever choose, least of all the gods; as Sappho
famously put it, “Death is an evil. The Gods have so judged, for otherwise they

1. All Greek translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
2. The standard introduction to Greek attitudes toward death remains Garland 1985, which surveys epi-
  graphical, archeological, and visual evidence as well as literary sources; for an updated overview of the subject,
  see Mirto 2012.

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would die” (frag. 201). The evil of death is rather in the kind of life that remains for the dead—a life lacking substance, intelligence, and vitality—and in the unbridgeable distance of that shadowy world from the world of the living. From the survivor’s point of view, it is the latter concern, the realization that communication and reciprocity with the deceased are no longer possible (at least in any meaningful sense), that makes death so difficult to bear.4

One of the most poignant expressions of this difficulty in Greek poetry is articulated not by the survivor but by the deceased. The example I have in mind is Patroclus’ visitation to Achilles in Book 23 of the Iliad. Achilles has spent the day single-handedly routing the Trojan army, has chased Patroclus’ slayer, Hector, around the city walls three times before finally cutting him down, and has brought Hector’s mutilated body as a macabre offering to Patroclus’ bier. Finally Achilles lays his weary limbs down on the shore of the Greek encampment and sleeps. His sleep is disturbed by Patroclus’ psuchê—his shade or ghost5—which cannot find passage to Hades while Patroclus’ body remains unburied (23.65–79):

And there came to him the soul of poor Patroclus,
in every way like him, the stature, the beautiful eyes, and the voice,
and it wore clothing like Patroclus had worn on its body.
It stood over Achilles’ head and spoke a word to him:
“You sleep—truly you have become forgetful of me, Achilles.
Yet you were not careless of me when I lived, only in my death.
Bury me as quickly as you can, so that I may pass through the gates of Hades.
Souls, images of the fallen, hold me at a distance,
and will not let me cross the river yet to mingle among them,
but I wander as I am along Hades’ house of the wide gates.
Give me your hand—I grieve! For not again
will I come back from Hades, once you’ve consigned me to the fire.
No longer will you and I, alive, sit apart from our other
beloved friends and make plans, since my hateful fate,
assigned to me at birth, has opened its gaping jaws for me.”

The charge of carelessness (ἀκηδία), we know, could not be further from the truth. Everything Achilles has done from the moment he learned of Patroclus’ death until this point he has done to honor and avenge his friend: accepting his own fated death by returning to battle, capturing twelve Trojan youths to sacrifice at the funeral pyre, fighting an angry river god, killing and desecrating Patroclus’ killer. If Achilles has delayed the final act of cremation and burial, it is not out of neglect or lack of care for Patroclus, but out of a desire to prolong this penultimate period of mourning, in which the bodies of both men exist in the same world, and where the possibility of some kind of communion between

4. To be sure, the elaborate nature of Greek funerary practices from interment to tomb cult, and the importance placed on observing them, presume that the bond between the living and the dead persists in some form, but it is tenuous, inconsistently conceived, and subject to skepticism; see Garland 1985, 118–21 and Mirto 2012, 93–94.

5. Unlike classical and post-classical conceptions of the soul, the Homeric psuchê only appears at the moment of death, and represents a ghostly image of the true self identified with the living person; see Bremmer 1983, 13–24, 73–89; Garland 1985, 18; Mirto 2012, 10–11; and n. 54 below.
them, be it spiritual or physical, remains. Achilles’ reaction to the vision of the ghost strengthens this impression; he marvels that Patroclus has returned from the dead, begs him to linger, attempts to embrace him, and when this fails finds comfort in the fact that there is something left of his friend in Hades (23.94–107). Even before the poet tells us Achilles’ reaction, we see the ghost from Achilles’ loving and awestruck perspective; the features of Patroclus’ ψυχή are beautiful, its likeness to his living person uncanny, and its familiar voice a welcome call from the impenetrable silence of death. As Achilles wistfully relates to his comrades upon waking: “the shade...told me everything I should do, and seemed wondrously [θέασκελον] like him” (23.106–7).

But the vision itself and the communication it enables are only possible because of Achilles’ offense; his reluctance to bury Patroclus’ body has suspended Patroclus’ soul in a liminal state between worlds, and has thus breached the metaphysical barrier that should separate them. Even though Patroclus returns from the dead expressly to seal this breach, he too cannot quite let go: “give me your hand—I grieve!” The shade mourns not its own death but the death of a friendship, because entering Hades makes the shared life that is a condition for friendship impossible. Patroclus will no longer be able to visit Achilles as he does now, and they will no longer sit apart and “make plans” (βουλεύσομεν) as they did when he was alive—the metaphysical separation imposed by death has denied the pair a common future. Patroclus’ last request to have Achilles’ bones buried in the same funeral urn as his own is in defiance of this separation; it expresses a hope that a common future and the resumption of friendship might still be possible (23.81–92). Elsewhere Achilles declares with even greater defiance that his love for Patroclus will override the laws of Hades: “Though the dead forget the dead in the house of Hades, even there I will remember my dear friend” (22.389–90).

For all his grief over the loss of this friendship and his moving attempt to somehow sustain it, Patroclus still insists on burial, but for reasons that are nevertheless consistent with his attachment to Achilles and the life he lived with him. The reason the liminality of Patroclus’ soul is undesirable to him—as opposed to being a valuable means of maintaining some connection to the living—is that he is shunned by the new community to which he now, as a shade, belongs. The other dead souls across the river “hold [him] at a distance” (τηλέμεε ἀργουσι) and deny him access to Hades proper. He cannot “mingle” (μίσγεσθαι) among them because he is not yet one of them. In order to gain membership to the community

6. Cf. Odysseus’ failed attempts to embrace the shade of his mother at Od. 11.204–9; see n. 54 below.
7. Death in Hesiod is “voice-robbing” (λαθίφθογγος, Sc. 131).
8. Garland (1985, 47) uses this logic to explain the taboo status of the corpse before interment: “The corpse is taboo because the corpse is sacred, and it is sacred because the dead person, in the initial period after his decease, lacks a proper social identity in either world.” On the liminality of the unburied corpse, see also Bremmer 1983, 89–99.
10. For other expressions of this hope in literary and epigraphical sources, see Mirto 2012, 101–2.
11. On the unorthodoxy of this declaration, see Mirto 2012, 113–14: “[Achilles] asserts that his willpower can oppose the dismal Homeric phenomenology of death...He confidently replaces the usual dream (resuming a previous friendship in the afterlife) with the conviction that his condition will be unchanged and stable, that his memory will resist even the laws of Hades.”
of the dead—the only community now available to him—Patroclus’ connection
to the living must be severed. As long as his dead body remains a site of living
interaction, Patroclus’ soul wanders in isolation along the metaphysical border,
unable to rejoin the living or dwell among the dead, and this isolation is a greater
hell to the Greek imagination than Hell itself.  

In scenes like these, Greek poetry powerfully expresses our longing for the
dead and our longing for community, longings that we imagine persisting even
beyond our death. The force of such poetic expressions derives from the value
we place on individuals, on shared human life, and on the vital, organic life on
earth of which the afterlife, in the mainstream Greek poetic tradition at least, is
a pale imitation.  These are values that Socratic and Platonic philosophy will
challenge, because they make tragedy an inevitable feature of human life; our
loved ones die, our communities are temporary and vulnerable, and whatever
awaits us after death is unlikely to offer us something better. Facing up to these
facts—reveling, even, in their devastating indifference to human flourishing—
is the stuff of poetry, and Greek epic and tragic poetry in particular. But these
are “facts” that Plato’s Socrates will deny the truth of, replacing ephemeral and
vulnerable objects of value with eternal and invulnerable objects: knowledge, truth,
Forms. The promise of this philosophical transvaluation is the promise of a life
free of tragedy.

MOURNING IN THE REPUBLIC

Because the pain of bereavement is so acute and inconsolable, and attenuating
the attachments that produce this reaction is one of philosophy’s main goals,
Socrates’ critique of poetry in Plato’s Republic focuses on representations of
the bereaved figure and on the spectator’s identification with this figure. If bear-
ing bereavement easily is difficult to do, so too is representing and relating to
such philosophical bearing, yet poetry and its audience must create this dynamic,
according to Plato, if our philosophical commitments are to be reinforced rather
than undermined by the poetic experience. The Republic thus presents poets and
audiences with a challenge: could the former represent a philosophical response
to the greatest imaginable misfortune, and could the latter be moved by such a
representation? The Phaedo, I will argue, takes up this challenge. Though tradi-
tionally regarded as a “transitional” dialogue to Plato’s so-called middle period,
where the Republic falls, many scholars now concede that most arguments for the
chronological sequence of the dialogues are at bottom speculative, based as they
are on dubious stylometric grounds and the presumption of a linear progression
to Plato’s thought. For my purposes it does not matter whether or not the Phaedo
precedes the Republic, only that the two share a common theme in the imitability

12. See Mirto 2012, 17 on the grounds for the psuchê’s anxiety in this scene. On the horror of isolation,
consider the punishment of the hero Bellerophon: “when he incurred the hatred of all the gods, he wandered
alone along the Wanderer’s Plain, eating his heart out, shunning the trodden track of men” (Il. 6.200–202).

13. Fringe traditions that propose positive visions of the afterlife develop in the Classical and Hellenistic
periods in the form of mystery cults, but they remain minority views; see Mirto 2012, 29–61.


15. See the seminal article by Howland (1991). For a short and lucid overview of the problems with Platonic
chronology, see Zuckert 2009, 2–5.
of a philosophical response to bereavement and death. Interpreting the *Phaedo* in light of the *Republic*’s critique of grief and its representation will reveal, I hope, a fruitful tension in Plato’s thought.

In the last book of the dialogue, Socrates fleetingly evokes the image of the philosopher as tragic hero only to doubt the possibility of representing him (604e–605a):

> The element in us that affords much and varied imitation is the excitable element, while the prudent and calm disposition, which is always nearly equal to itself, is neither easily imitated nor, when imitated, easily understood, especially by a motley crew gathered at the theater. For the imitation is of a condition that is surely alien to them . . . then clearly the imitative poet isn’t naturally directed toward any such part of soul, and his skill isn’t aimed at satisfying it—if he’s going to be popular with the many—but rather toward the excitable and colorful disposition, because it is easily imitated.

The passage comes at the heels of Socrates’ description of a bereaved father’s struggle to resist succumbing to grief, “to remain as calm as possible [μάλιστα ἡ συχίαν ἄγειν] in misfortune and not get worked up [ἀγανακτει̃ν]” (604b). The father’s rationality, reflected in his public composure, recognizes the transience of human life and the futility of mourning, and deliberates on how best to recover from this calamity; while another, more childish impulse—“the irrational and fruitless” part of the soul he indulges in private—“leads to reminiscences of the suffering, and to lamentations, and can’t get enough of these” (604b–d). When Socrates then turns from the bereaved father’s impulse to grieve to the psychic target of mimetic poetry, he means to identify the two: the “excitable” part of us (τὸ ἀγανακτικτικὸν) that responds to tragic spectacle is the same childish part of us that “gets worked up” (ἀγανακτει̃ν) over misfortune and is drawn to senseless and debilitating grief. Likewise the “prudent and calm” (φρόνιμόν τε καὶ ἡ σύχιον) character so resistant to imitation recalls reason’s injunction in the case of the bereaved father to “remain calm” (ἡ συχίαν ἄγειν) in the face of his loss. This psychological opposition recurs moments later in Socrates’ greatest charge against mimetic poetry for leading even the most moderate and self-possessed among us to lose our self-possession in sympathy for the grieving hero (605c–d):

> When the very best of us listen to Homer or some other maker of tragedy imitating a hero who is in mourning and drawing out a long speech with laments, or men chanting and beating their chests, you know that we enjoy it, and that, surrendering ourselves, we follow them with sympathy, and in all seriousness we praise as excellent the poet who most of all succeeds in this . . . But when a personal misfortune befalls one of us, you are aware that, on the contrary, we pride ourselves if we are able to remain calm and persevere, believing that this is the manner of a man, and that which we were then praising the manner of a woman.

When it comes to depicting tragedy, poetry makes us act against our better judgment, offering us the hero as avatar; through him we give our latent and repressed desire to grieve over loss and misfortune (configured here as a feminine as well

16. I make the case elsewhere that grieving and tragic poetry appeal to the same appetitive desire in the *Republic*: see Liebert 2013 and 2017. See also Halliwell 1994 and 1996 for lucid discussions of how the psychology of grief underpins Plato’s hostility to tragic poetry.
as a childish impulse) full expression, even though doing so weakens our psychic resolve against this particularly stubborn and pathological appetite by reinforcing mistaken commitments to ephemeral objects, the most intractable of which is our attachment to other human beings.17 The tragic hero’s extravagant display of grief thus undermines the bereaved father’s struggle to overcome his own, thereby impeding his recovery and weakening the audience’s general psychological immunity and resilience.

But Socrates has suggested, however dubiously, that the poetic hero could behave differently, that he could offer us a salubrious model of heroic self-possession and philosophical equanimity. Because resisting the impulse to grieve over the loss of a loved one is, as Socrates concedes, extremely difficult in life (Resp. 603e)—and examples of such heroic composure are exceedingly rare—depicting this resistance and composure in poetry is equally difficult and rare, but may nevertheless be possible. What would such a character look like, and how could a normal audience relate to him or her? Whoever attempts this task is no ordinary poet appealing to an ordinary audience.

A philosophical poet—or a poetic philosopher—appealing to a philosophical audience may succeed where the mimetic poet fails.18 In suggesting the possibility of imitating a philosophical response to death (the “prudent and calm disposition, which is always nearly equal to itself”) Plato sets himself a challenge in the Republic that he takes up in the Phaedo,19 a dialogue depicting Socrates in his final hours surrounded by his most intimate friends (and, all too briefly, family), discussing the nature and meaning of death before death itself ends the conversation. It is tempting to argue that Socrates’ composure in the face of execution (not to mention his philosophical interrogation of the fact of execution) meets the terms outlined in the Republic—indeed, exceeds them, as Socrates positively welcomes death as the object of a lifelong pursuit in his practice of philosophy as a renunciation of the body and the “practice of dying” (Phd. 64a, 67e, 81a). But while the cheerful equanimity with which Socrates accepts his own death is held up as a model of courage (“so fearlessly and nobly did he meet his end,” observes Phaedo [58e]), it cannot be a model for the grieving, for the simple fact that Socrates is not himself the one bereaved, but the one departing. I want to suggest that the tragic hero of the Phaedo is not the philosopher Socrates, despite his ironic self-designation as a “tragic man” (ἀνήρ τραγικός) going to meet his fate (115a),20 but rather (as the title suggests) Phaedo himself, along with the other disciples who will survive the loss of their mentor and struggle to understand the meaning

17. See Halliwell 1996 on Plato’s view of grief as the expression of a commitment to false values. Socrates links grief to mistaken value judgments at Resp. 604b–c, and includes it among the physical and affective sensations that compel false beliefs and distort judgment at Phd. 83b–c, on which see more below.


19. A suggestion also made by Halliwell (1994, 55–56), who reads the Phaedo as a failed attempt to meet the challenge of depicting a philosophical anti-tragedy, as I will too, but for different reasons. Halliwell sees Plato as airing a tragic perspective in the dialogue that he is unable to suppress (“Plato the tragedian has not been wholly suppressed by Plato the metaphysician,” 58), while I want to suggest that Plato recognizes a tragic impasse within Socratic philosophy occasioned by the death of Socrates, and that part of the dialogue’s aim is to uncover and explore this impasse.

20. See Halliwell 1996, 339 on the significance of this designation, which conveys not only a character in tragedy or a writer of tragedies, but one who adopts a tragic perspective on the world.
of that loss: “for we thought of him as a father, and that when bereft of him we would pass the rest of our lives as orphans” (116a). While the figure of the orphaned child inverts the bereaved father evoked in the Republic, both stand for the survivor grappling with the death of a loved one, and with the grim prospect of facing a future without that loved one. In looking forward to a more illustrious company of interlocutors in the world beyond (63b–c, 111b–c), Socrates faces no such prospect, and therefore crucially lacks the tragic condition of irrevocable loss that calls for nearly impossible and inimitable self-possession. When we turn to Socrates’ disciples, however, and read the dialogue from their perspective (as it was written), the Phaedo becomes a work of philosophical mourning that views the death of Socrates as precisely such a loss, but on philosophical rather than conventional grounds; for Socrates is repeatedly characterized as the only man alive who can teach others how to live a philosophical life that will earn them an eternally blessed afterlife. It is, then, a commitment to philosophy as the ascetic purification of the soul with a view to its eventual disembodiment, rather than a commitment to the ephemeral, physical world inhabited by perishable bodies, that paradoxically leads to the disciple’s attachment to the physical person of Socrates. The singularity of Socrates and the suggestion that the loss of his person could impede the disciple’s philosophical progress reintroduces tragedy into a philosophical vision of life that purports to overcome it.

MOURNING IN THE PHAEDO

The Phaedo, like a number of Platonic dialogues notable for their complex narrative structure, is staged as a disciple’s memory of a Socratic conversation. In this case, however, the act of recollection rings a distinctly elegiac note, in part because the conversation recalled is Socrates’ last, but more importantly because Phaedo himself nostalgically welcomes the occasion for remembering and commemorating Socrates after his death. In response to Echecrates’ request to hear, if Phaedo has the time, a precise account of everything that happened at the death of Socrates—what was said, what was done, who was there—Phaedo responds: “I certainly do have the time and I will try to tell you. For remembering

21. Ahrendsdorf (1995) notes that the Phaedo is the only Platonic dialogue named after its narrator, an anomaly that further highlights the importance of Phaedo’s perspective for interpreting the work. See also Jansen 2013, 337–38 for an emphasis on the plight of Socrates’ companions as central to the drama of the dialogue.

22. Admittedly, the death of a child is less common and less natural than the death of a parent, especially an aged parent, and the perversity of surviving a child is no doubt the reason Socrates chooses this scenario in the Republic to illustrate the greatest test of a person’s psychic control (603e). But even “natural” and anticipated deaths shock and grieve the survivors, and the death of Socrates, old and paternal as he is, stands as the greatest test of a philosophical disciple’s psychic control, because Socrates represents the object of greatest value to that disciple.

23. Jansen (2013, 338) recognizes the danger posed by the death of Socrates to the philosophical progress of his companions, but nonetheless reads the dialogue optimistically: “much of the dramatic action consists in Socrates’ valiant efforts to bequeath to the companions affective and intellectual prerequisites for bettering their souls.” Jansen’s confidence in Socrates’ intellectual bequest would preserve philosophy’s immunity to tragedy, but ignores, in my view, the grave doubts Plato raises about the success of the Socratic legacy without the person of Socrates.

24. The Symposium, Theaetetus, and Parmenides are also notable for their complex narrative construction. On the tensions between this complex narrative practice and the normative narrative theory laid out by Socrates in Plato’s Republic, see Halliwell 2009.
Socrates, whether by speaking about him myself or by listening to someone else, is always for me the greatest pleasure of all” (58d). Speaking of Socrates after his death becomes the only means to access Socrates and his redemptive wisdom for those who feel impoverished without him—and thus becomes their greatest source of pleasure. Both Echecrates’ request and Phaedo’s response contain as well the solicitation for the aid of others in reviving the figure of Socrates. When Echecrates responds that Phaedo will find a sympathetic audience in the present company (58d), the commemoration of Socrates becomes a collective endeavor to ameliorate the pain suffered by Socrates’ survivors. This commemorative project also reflects metatextually on the status of the dialogue that represents it, inviting us to consider all of Plato’s dialogues as memoria motivated by the longing for Socrates’ person and offering a means of recovering him for the living people who need his guidance.25 In light of the Republic’s strictures against mourning and Socrates’ call to “banish threnody [θηνῳ δίαν] with healing [ἰατρικῇ]” (604d), however, Phaedo and Plato’s strategies for coping with the death of Socrates raise a difficult question: Does the commemoration of Socratic conversations qualify as a deliberative act of therapy, or is clinging to the memory of Socrates (as the bereaved father clings to the memory of his son) a counterproductive and debilitating act of grief? Is mourning Socrates a continuation of philosophical activity or (like Socrates’ actual death) its tragic interruption? If the latter, what is Plato’s purpose in depicting such a tragedy? We will return to these questions at the end.

Phaedo begins by recalling his bewildering emotional response to the scene of Socrates’ death, and attempting, in hindsight, to make sense of it (Phd. 58e–59a). He did not feel pity, as one would expect to feel at the death of the friend and as a witness to misfortune (παρόντι πένθει), because Socrates’ cheerfulness inspired confidence that death had something good in store for him; nor did Phaedo derive his customary intellectual pleasure from the philosophical discussions that took place, “but rather a very strange feeling [ἄτοπον τί ... πάθος] came over me, an unusual mixture [ἀθηνοκρα̃σις] of pleasure and pain together, when I considered that this man was presently going to die” (59a). Upon having his fetters removed, Socrates will ascribe what Phaedo takes to be an atypical conjunction of opposing sensations to all embodied forms of experience (60b–c), and will later include both grief and love among those violent sensations that distort our judgment and deepen our attachment to worldly objects (83b–c). Phaedo does not, for the moment, recognize the banality or the corporeality of his mixed emotions, but is puzzled instead by the senselessness of grieving for someone who seems to suffer no misfortune. In presenting himself as a witness to rather than a victim of misfortune, Phaedo misconstrues the source of tragedy in this event and so fails to understand his own reaction to it;26 it is only at the end of

25. So Ahrensdorf 1995, 17: “Plato suggests that, through followers like Phaedo (and Plato himself) who will continue to recount the speeches of their teacher, Socrates will continue to inspire, to teach, and to ‘corrupt’ the philosophic young.” As I will argue in greater detail below, I see reasons to doubt Plato’s confidence in the success of commemoration as a continuation of Socratic philosophy, and to see an alternative approach to philosophy at work in the dialogue.

26. Simmias, too, will mistakenly view Socrates as a victim when he hesitates to challenge Socrates’ arguments for the soul’s immortality, “for fear it may be unpleasant [ἴηδς] for you in your present misfortune [τὴν παρου̃σαν συμφοράν]” (84d). Socrates good-naturedly corrects him, as he will later correct Crito, when he
the dialogue, in the course of describing Socrates’ physical death, that Phaedo realizes the grounds for his grief: “I wrapped my face in my cloak and I wept for myself [ιππέκλαον ἐμαυτόν]; for it was not for him that I wept, but for my own misfortune [τὴν ἐμαυτοῦ τύχην], that I would be deprived of such a man [ὁίου ἄνδρος] as a friend” (117c–d). The dialogue tracks Phaedo and the other disciples’ growing awareness that death itself is not the lamentable evil to be feared so much as the loss of the unique person of Socrates, the only mentor and guide who could lead them on the path to philosophical salvation.27

The philosopher’s need for intellectual mentorship is a recurring theme in the discussions recounted by Phaedo. It first arises in Cebes’ reaction to Socrates’ injunction against suicide for being a form of impiety; because we are the “possessions” (κτήματα) of the gods, taking our fate into our own hands usurps the authority of our better and wiser custodians (and so presumably does us more harm than good).28 Cebes agrees with the deference we owe the gods, but objects to the desirability of death that, according to Socrates, makes suicide a temptation in the first place.29 In response to Socrates’ conclusion that we must wait, alas, for the gods to decide when death will free us from our bodies, Cebes replies (62c–e):

That seems likely . . . But what you said just now, that philosophers should be ready and willing to die, that seems strange, Socrates, if we were right just now in saying that god is our caretaker and we are his possessions. For that the most intelligent men should not be troubled [τὸ . . . μὴ ἐγγονοτετῇ] to leave the attendance in which the gods, who are the best overseers of all, are watching over them, this doesn’t make sense. I don’t suppose anyone thinks that he can take better care of himself, once he is free, than they do. A foolish man, perhaps, might think this, that he should run away from his master, failing to realize that he shouldn’t run away from a good master, but should remain with him as long as possible; for this reason he might thoughtlessly run away. But a man of sense would wish to be always with one who is better than himself. And yet, Socrates, if we look at it this way, the opposite of what we just said seems likely; the wise ought to be troubled at dying, and the foolish to rejoice.

Cebes’ remarks are pointed. On the surface, they launch a thinly veiled attack against Socrates’ complacency before his execution, and allude to his baffling rejection of the escape plan orchestrated and financed by Socrates’ closest friends (among them Cebes himself) two days prior, as recounted in the Crito (45b). But whereas in that dialogue Socrates appealed to justice and the laws of the city to explain his acceptance of the death sentence, here he appeals to the desirability of death itself.30 A more adept debater than Crito, Cebes is able

27. See also Jansen 2013, 337. On the uniqueness and “strangeness” (atopia) of Socrates, see Eide 1996 and Michelini 2003, 45–50.
28. Socrates’ relates this position to a “secret doctrine” that is likely to be Orphic or Pythagorean in origin (ὁ . . . ἐν ἀπαρθήτοις λεγόμενος . . . λόγος, 62b); see Garland 1985, 97–98 and Rowe 1993, 128–29.
29. Ahrensford’s (1995, 27) speculation that Cebes’ interest in hearing Socrates’ perspective on suicide betrays a death-wish is misguided, I think, and inconsistent with Cebes’ persistent fear of death (77d–e). Cebes presses the issue with Socrates not because he wants to die but because he resents Socrates’ own death wish, and so calls him to account.
30. Socrates does reiterate the political reasons he gave Crito for refusing to escape prison at Phd. 98e–99a, but those reasons remain secondary to the metaphysical arguments for the immortality of the soul that account for Socrates’ eager anticipation of death.
to use Socrates’ argument against suicide to undermine his argument for the benefit of death, and implicitly contrasts the “good masters” of our life on earth with the bad masters of the Athenian court; Socrates, Cebes suggests, should have fled his corrupt city in order to remain in the custodianship of the virtuous gods. Cebes ends his speech by insinuating, rather indelicately, that Socrates is a fool for welcoming his death. His pointed accusation does not express Thrasy- 
chaean or Calliclean contempt for the philosopher’s apparent naivete, though, so much as resentment that stems from a sense of betrayal. For the “man of sense” who wants to remain in the company of an intellectual superior reflects Cebes’ own status as Socrates’ disciple, and this parallel introduces a second accusation into the speech: that Socrates, “the better man,” is abandoning his charges and failing as an overseer of their philosophical education. The message is not lost on Simmias, who had also helped finance the escape route for Socrates (Cri. 45b) and now shares Cebes’ grievance. When he comes to his fellow Theban’s aid, Simmias expresses the accusation implicit in Cebes’ speech more forcefully: “It strikes me that Cebes is aiming [τείνειν] his argument at you, because you are so ready to abandon us [ἡ μα̃ςἀ πολείπων] and the gods, who are, as you yourself agree, good rulers” (Phd. 63a–b).

Socrates concedes the legitimacy of their complaints and from that point on assumes the position of a defendant making a second defense speech, this time before a philosophically minded jury. Socrates will make a greater effort to persuade his fellow philosophers of his innocence than he did before the un- 
philosophical Athenian court (63b–c):

Well, then, . . . let me try to make a more convincing defense before you than I did before the judges. For, Simmias and Cebes . . . if I did not think that I was going to other wise and good gods, and, moreover, to men who have died, better men than those here [ἄμεινος τῶν ἐνθάδε], I would be wrong in not grieving [οὐ κἀ γανακτω̃ν] at death. But as things are, you may rest assured that I expect to meet with good men, though I would not want to assert this positively; that I am going to gods who are exceedingly good masters, though, know well that I would maintain this as surely as anything about such matters. And therefore, not only do I not grieve, but I am hopeful that something remains for the dead, and, as tradition has it, something better for the good than for the evil.

Socrates frames his ensuing defense as a justification for the philosopher’s refusal to lament his own death or to conceive of death as a tragedy. Such a defense is incomplete, however, and from the survivor’s point of view jarringly insensitive. For Socrates completely ignores the suggestion that he owes a debt of care to his disciples and seems to abdicate his responsibilities as a philosophical mentor, focusing instead on his own well-being in the afterlife, where he is confident that he will find excellent masters and—this hurts—better friends. Far from

31. Thrasy- 
chaeus and Callicles both represent “realist” perspectives that dismiss Socrates’ idealism as naive (see in particular Resp. 343a–344c; Grg. 481b–486d, 491c–492d).

32. See also Burger 1999, 34 and 85–86 on the accusation against Socrates for his willingness to abandon his friends. Ahrendsdorf (1995, 30–33) unduly distinguishes Cebes’ and Simmias’ positions in this exchange, though he is right to recognize in their joint accusation a philosophical iteration of the Athenian charges against Socrates for impiety and corruption.

33. As Burger (1999, 34) puts it: “He seems, indeed, to go out of his way to insult his companions by declaring his hope of traveling to the company of better men.”
comforting his disciples and assuring them of their ability to find a “good master” in his absence, Socrates eagerly anticipates replacing them with a view to improving his own intellectual condition. Simmias and Cebes, whether out of delicacy or embarrassment, refrain from pressing the point. Instead, Simmias seizes the opportunity to elicit one last seminar from his teacher, imploring Socrates to share his thoughts on the afterlife with the rest of them before he departs: “It seems to me that this is a good which is common to us too, and at the same time, if you convince us by what you say, you will have your defense [ἀπολογία]” (63d). Simmias has let Socrates off the hook; Socrates’ defense no longer needs to address the debt he owes his disciples as an intellectual mentor, but only the debt he owes himself as a philosopher in pursuit of wisdom.34

In the arguments that follow Socrates characterizes philosophy as the “practice of dying and death” (ἐπιτηδεύουσιν ἀποθνῄσκειν τε καὶ τεθνάναι, 64a; ἀποθνῄσκειν μελέτης, 67e; μελέτη θανάτου, 81a) and makes the case that the greatest goods await those of us who dedicate themselves to this practice (63e–69e). What Socrates means by such a provocative expression, which has the ring of an oxymoron (how can the finality of death be subject to the repetition of practice?) is that pursuing knowledge (φρόνησις) of “things in themselves” (also referred to throughout as ideas [ἰδέα], forms [ἐίδη], realities [τὰ ὀντα], essence [οὐσία], and being [τὸ ὄν, τὸ ἐἶναι]) means overcoming the distortions of sense perception and the distractions of physical demands. When doing this, we distance ourselves from our bodies, using our minds alone (“thought itself” [αὐτῇ τῇ διανοίᾳ], identified with the soul [65e]) to access the abstract, incorporeal realm of concepts, where truth resides. This distancing approximates and anticipates the separation between body and soul that actually occurs in death, which we should regard as the coveted liberation of the mind from the shackles and confusions of corporeal existence. Upon dying we finally attain the intellectual clarity we have been longing for all our lives. Why, then, shouldn’t the philosopher welcome death (68a–b)?

When human loves or wives or sons have died, many men have willingly gone to Hades led by the hope that they will catch sight of those whom they long for, and that they’ll be with them. Will he who is really in love with knowledge [φρονήσεως . . . τὸ ὄντι ἐρών] and has firmly held on to this same hope that nowhere else but in Hades can he encounter it in any way worth speaking of, will he grieve when he dies [ἀγανακτήσει . . . ἀποθνῄσκων] and not be happy to go there? One must certainly think so, my friend, if he is really a philosopher; for he will confidently believe that he will encounter pure knowledge [καθαρῶς . . . φρονήσει] nowhere else than there. And if this is so, as we were just saying, would it not be very foolish for such a man to fear death?

In comparing knowledge or wisdom (φρόνησις) to human objects of affection, Socrates is not only making an analogy, but appealing to a position he defends elsewhere that the philosopher must sublimate human attachments into intellectual

34. Ahrensdorf (1995, 36) suggests that Simmias “acquits” Socrates of the charge of injustice against his friends in exchange for a lesson on the afterlife that would promote the “common good” of those present. But Socrates’ refusal to address the charge still calls for an explanation, and suggests an implicit priority in the philosopher’s scheme of values for his own psychic well-being over that of his disciples. This priority surfaces in the Republic as well, when it becomes clear that the philosopher-kings will have to be forced to interrupt their philosophical contemplation in order to rule for the benefit of their subjects (519c–520e).
attachments; if he recognizes that the lovable qualities of human beings are particular and imperfect instantiations of the virtues themselves, which exist only as pure objects of thought, then his passion or *eros* will be redirected from people and particulars to the absolute Forms they only imperfectly reflect. This understanding of philosophical *eros* underpins Socrates’ claim in the *Phaedo* that a true “lover” or *erastès* of wisdom (ἐραστὴς φρονήσεως, 66e) welcomes death as an eagerly anticipated erotic encounter with the most elusive object of desire in life: *phronēsis*, understood as unmediated access to the Forms themselves. Such a prospect is an occasion for joy rather than grief.

But what of those the philosopher leaves behind? Is Socrates ignoring their predicament, or is he gently reminding them that their attachment to his person is misguided and potentially pathological? Socrates uses the medical language of purification and contamination throughout to conceptualize psychic health as the product of the strictest asceticism (esp. 80d–83e), presenting embodiment itself, at one point, as the first “disease” (νόσος) of the soul (95d). “For it is not permitted,” he says, “for the impure [μὴ καθαρῷ] to attain the pure [καθαρῷ]” (67b). While the philosopher who practiced death by disassociating himself from the physical world is able to purify his soul and departs, upon dying, to the ethereal realm of the real, those contaminated by their earthly attachments remain tethered to the illusory world of the senses, flitting about like ghosts in payment for their sins (80d–81e, 108a–b). Socrates mixes his figures, combining images of medical practice and disease with mythic, Orphic, and Pythagorean conceptions of reincarnation and the afterlife, none of which should be taken literally. The main point is that the physical world we live in, whether as a site of infection or a hell on earth, is an obstacle to be overcome in order to live a fuller, truer existence beyond death, and that the possibility of failure is a very real danger, with consequences all the more dire in light of the soul’s immortality: “for if death were a release from everything, it would be a blessing to those who are vicious . . . but since the soul appears to be immortal, it can have no escape from evil [ἀποφυγὴ κακῶν] or deliverance [σωτηρία] except by becoming as good [βελτίστης] and wise [φρονιμωτάτης] as possible” (107c–d).

Becoming good and wise demands an asceticism that rejects not only the indulgence of carnal pleasures condemned by conventional morality, but of emotional attachments as well, which give rise to acute sensations like grief and fear, by which the soul “is compelled [ἀναγκάζεται] to believe . . . that the object for which it suffers so is very distinct [ἐναργέστατον] and very true [ἀληθέστατον], when it is not” (83c). The reality that we falsely ascribe to our strongest sensations occludes our access to what is really real, and the source of our strongest sensations in life—stronger

35. See esp. *Symp.* 210a–212c; *Phdr.* 244a–257b. The *Phaedo* passage’s resonance with discussions of *eros* in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* is noted by Rowe (1993, 145–46). See Ferrari 1992 on Plato’s philosophical appropriation of *eros* in the later two dialogues; on Plato’s attitude toward love in general, see Kraut (2008), who aims to redeem the value of human relationships in Plato’s philosophy (particularly in the final pages, 308–10).

36. Admittedly, this phrase occurs in Socrates’ characterization of Cebes’ argument, but it is consistent with Socrates’ attitude toward embodiment in general.

37. Jansen (2013, 342–43) offers a compelling interpretation of Socrates’ somaticization of the soul in these myths, suggesting that his aim is to redirect his companions’ biological fear of death to the fate of the soul rather than the body.
even than physical pleasures and pains—are the human relationships that become precious to us. If the practice of philosophy is the practice of rejecting all worldly attachments in preparation for the otherworldly encounter with truth and wisdom, which will always elude the corporeal soul until it learns to do the same, then the attachment to the seemingly “distinct and true” person of Socrates is indeed a burden on his disciples, another nail (to use yet another Socratic metaphor) sealing the soul in the coffin of the body (83d). But precisely because how we live our lives crucially determines our soul’s ability to attain wisdom and commune with the Forms after death, those human attachments that help us live a philosophical life of ascetic detachment become, paradoxically, precious sources of philosophical value.

Examples of this paradoxical value recur throughout the dialogue. When, in the course of making his argument for recollection, Socrates asks Simmias if everybody can give an account of the things they knew in their disembodied state, Simmias responds by denying this ability to all but Socrates: “I wish they could, but I fear that tomorrow, at this time, there will no longer be anyone among men who can do so properly” (76b). Socrates ignores the compliment and its tragic implications, but his silence only lends credence to Simmias’ fear. When Cebes admits to having a childish fear of death based on a materialist conception of the soul, and Socrates recommends that he “charm” (ἐπάτρειν) the child within with philosophical incantations, Cebes asks: “Where, Socrates . . . will we find a good singer [ἀγαθὸν ἐπῳδόν] of such charms, since you are abandoning us [ημᾶς ἀπολείπες]?” (77e–78a). Once again, Cebes reminds Socrates of the philosopher’s debt to his charges by suggesting that Socrates is an irreplaceable intellectual mentor. And once again, Socrates’ response is far from comforting (78a):

Hellas is large, Cebes . . . in which there are many good men, and many races of foreign people too. You should search through all of them in pursuit of such a charmer, sparing neither expense nor effort. For there is nothing on which you could spend your money more opportune, but you must also search among yourselves, for perhaps you would not easily find others better able to do this than you.

Socrates reaffirms the importance of finding someone to play his role, “sparing no expense or effort”—an ironic reference to his own refusal to accept money for his philosophical mentorship, in contrast to the sophists and sham philosophers who teach for hire.38 This irony undercuts the optimistic picture Socrates initially presents of the favorable odds that someone among all the good people in Greece could take his place, and in the end he concedes that the present company may be the best there is.39 Socrates himself, we later learn (99c–d), was unable to

39. Ahrensdorf (1995, 89–90) suggests that Socrates means to exhort his disciples to rely on themselves individually for their intellectual progress, because depending on another human being for mentorship will only prolong their vulnerability to abandonment (Jansen [2013] and Gower [2008] both take up similar positions). But judging from the group’s inability to suppress their urge to lament his death at the end, this exhortation appears to be a failure. In other Platonic dialogues, Socrates’ singularity and unredeemable value is a theme: “For if you put me to death, you will not easily find another” (Apol. 30c); “I will lose a friend such as I can never find again” (Cri. 44b).
find an intellectual superior to be his teacher, a fact that reinforces his singularity and irreplaceability (though it does offer up a model of autonomous philosophical inquiry one may aspire to, however unattainable). Since Socrates remains better than his disciples by their own (and his) admission, his concession merely validates Cebes’ fear of intellectual abandonment and justifies Cebes’ former sense of betrayal. As before, though, Cebes does not press the point, returning them instead to the topic at hand; like Simmias, he seems keen to learn what he can from Socrates before his death.

To “charm away” Cebes’ childish fear of death, Socrates offers a third argument for the immortality of the soul based on its incomposite and invisible nature; the argument contains many digressions, but the essential point is that because only composite and visible entities are subject to decomposition and destruction, the soul as an incomposite, invisible entity must belong to the category of the indestructible (78c–84b). After making his case, Socrates assumes that he has put Cebes’ fear of death to rest, and falls silent (84b–c). But Simmias and Cebes are not content, and when Socrates becomes aware of their lingering doubts he suggests they revisit the topic: “if you are at a loss [ἀπορεῖτον] about these matters, do not hesitate to speak and explore them yourselves, if you think something better could have been said, and to take me along with you [ἐμὲ συμπαραλαβέων], if you think you’re better able to find your way in my company [μετ’ ἐμοῦ εὐπορήσειν]” (84c–d). With characteristic modesty, Socrates offers his intellectual aid to his struggling disciples by suggesting that he “tag along” on their search for the truth. His modest offer, though, belies the truth of their intellectual condition, which is one of dependence on the person of Socrates to navigate intellectual impasses. And this is precisely what he does with his successful rebuttal of Simmias’ and Cebes’ objections. Socrates’ exemplary guidance is flagged twice in this episode by Phaedo and Echecrates’ intrusions into the embedded narrative frame. The first occurs after Simmias and Cebes voice their objections that (1) the soul could be like a harmony, which is an example of an entity that is both invisible and perishable (Simmias: 85e–86d), and (2) the soul, like a tailor who wears out many cloaks, could be more durable than the body yet ultimately perishable (Cebes: 86e–88b). Phaedo remarks that these counterarguments effectively reduced everyone present to a state of “confusion and distrust [ἀναταράξαι καὶ εἰς ἀπιστίαν καταβαλεῖν], not only regarding the previous arguments but also with respect to any future one” (88c). Because they had been previously convinced by the truth of Socrates’ arguments for the immortality of the soul, discovering legitimate and unforeseen objections “made us fear that we would turn out to be worthless judges [ἀξίων . . . κριταί] or that the matters themselves were untrustworthy [τὰ πράγματα αὐτὰ ἀπισταὶ]” (88c). Here Echecrates interjects, admitting that he shares their fear, as he himself is presently just as confounded by Simmias and Cebes’ compelling objections in

40. This is the so-called “affinity” argument because of the soul’s resemblance to indestructible objects; the previous arguments for the immortality of the soul consist of the “cyclical” argument or argument from the generation of opposites (70c–72c) and the argument from recollection (72c–77d). The fourth and final argument is the argument from Forms (102a–107b), on which see below.

41. On navigation as a metaphor for the structure of Socratic dialectic, particularly in the Phaedo, see Kuperus 2007.
light of his previous confidence in the soundness of Socrates’ case (88c–e). Unable to bear the suspense, he implores Phaedo to recount Socrates’ response as accurately as possible (88e).

Phaedo happily obliges, but before resuming his account he takes a moment to express wonder and admiration at Socrates’ masterful handling of the group’s intellectual crisis (88e–89a):

Echecrates, I have often marveled at Socrates, but never did I admire him more than I did at that moment. That he had an account to give was not so strange, perhaps, but what I marveled at most about him was this; first, the pleasant, gracious, and respectful manner in which he listened to the young men’s arguments; secondly, his sharp perception of the effect their speeches had on us; and finally, the skill with which he cured us and, as it were, recalled us from our flight and defeat, urging us forward to follow closely and examine the argument together with him [συσκοπει̃τ ὦν λόγον].

Phaedo speaks in the affectionate tones of a protégé recalling his beloved master, whose death has left him wistful and nostalgic. What impresses Phaedo in hindsight—and what strikes him as truly distinctive (ἄτοπον) and irreplaceable about Socrates—is not Socrates’ particular arguments so much as his character and pedagogy. Socrates’ gracious demeanor, psychological acuity, and inspiring leadership in the face of intellectual adversity, confusion, and despair made him an extraordinarily effective teacher and commanded the dedicated loyalty of his pupils. Phaedo recognizes that Socrates’ humble offer to “tag along” on Simmias and Cebes’ mission is, in fact, a strategic form of guidance; Socrates is now portrayed in the commanding role of a general rallying his demoralized troops, but the nature of his command is markedly collaborative, as he exhorts his followers to follow “closely,” “alongside” (παρέπεσθαί), and to pursue their target “together” (συσκοπει̃τ) with him.42 Socrates famously refuses to preach in the sophist fashion, teaching instead by leading others to make discoveries on their own and to find their footing for themselves.43 His ability to show the way out of an intellectual impasse through dialectic, which requires the assent and cooperation of the interlocutor, cures his disciples of the worst intellectual disease: what Socrates calls “misology,” or losing faith in the power of argument, and thus doubting the intelligibility of the world (89c–91a).

Echecrates’ second interjection is a response to witnessing Socrates’ pedagogy in action, as it were. It occurs in the course of Socrates’ heroic effort to address Cebes’ concerns about the perishability of the soul, concerns which call for nothing short of a “thorough investigation of the cause [αἰτίαν] of generation [γενέσεως] and destruction [φθοράς] in general” (94e). Socrates offers in response an elaboration of his theory of Forms, presented to the group as his

42. Socrates uses the same strategy with Phaedo himself, who is, however, quick to recognize and expose it; when Socrates casts Phaedo as a Heracles leading the charge against Simmias and Cebes’ arguments, and offers up his aid as Heracles’ nephew and sidekick, Iolaus, Phaedo rightly reverts their roles: “Then I call on you to help... not as Heracles calling Iolaus, though, but as Iolaus calling Heracles” (89c; I am grateful to Luke Parker for pointing out the relevance of this passage). Jansen (2013, 340–41) sees in this exchange a continuation of Socrates’ attempt to encourage intellectual autonomy in his companions, who remain, however, reluctant to give up their “soul-father.” I want to suggest that this reluctance is warranted.

43. On the cooperative nature of Socratic dialectic, see Blank 1986, 157–63; Scott 2000, 43–49; and Kuperus 2007. See Gower 2008 for Socrates’ deliberate refusal to assume intellectual authority with his interlocutors in the Phaedo.
original attempt, after a lifelong struggle with the limitations of natural philosophy, to discover a teleological rather than empirical explanation of the cosmos (96a–107a). This struggle reflects Socrates’ own search for an intellectual mentor, the failure of which left him no choice but to conduct a “second sailing” in pursuit of the explanation on his own (99c–d). In the absence of a guide, and with no direct access to the ultimate aitia available to him, Socrates comes to rely on arguments and hypotheses, the “safest” of which is his hypothesis that absolute concepts or Forms operate as causal principles. At one point Socrates enjoins his companions to resist the clever types and “antilogicians” who seek to confuse and confound those committed to the ontological stability of truth, advising them to hold fast to the secure position that the attributes of things derive not from other relative attributes (which would make everything relative), but from their participation in absolute, unchanging, and context-independent Forms (100c–102a). Simmias and Cebes affirm the truth of this principle in unison, upon which Echecrates interrupts Phaedo’s account (102a):

E: By Zeus, Phaedo, that does make sense. For it seems to me that he stated the matter with astonishing [θαυμαστω̃ς] clarity, even to one with little sense.

Ph: Indeed, Echecrates, and all who were there [τᾶς τοῖς παροῦσιν] thought so too.

E: And so do we who were not there [ημῖν τοῖς ἄκουοσιν], but are hearing about it now [νῦν ... ἀκούουσιν].

Echecrates’ reaction, which had previously reflected Simmias’ and Cebes’ doubts, now mirrors their intellectual rehabilitation, and echoes Phaedo’s admiration for Socrates’ ability to effect it. Echecrates’ collapse of the temporal distance between those present at Socrates’ final conversation and those hearing about it after his death—his ability to participate imaginatively in Socratic dialectic through Phaedo’s mneumonic account—validates both Phaedo and Plato’s commemorative project, as it suggests that Socrates’ philosophical guidance can extend beyond the grave, in his disciples’ active recollection and dissemination of his conversations.

But this validation is short-lived, for soon after Echecrates reassures us of our access to Socratic wisdom through Phaedo’s memory, Phaedo’s memory

44. I am convinced by Gower (2008) that the autobiographical nature of Socrates’ account is intended to show Socrates’ disciples how intellectual autonomy is acquired and required for philosophical progress. But the account also highlights the singularity and exceptional nature of a man who could find no intellectual superior among the greatest minds of Greece, and this realization may well undermine the autobiography’s instructive purpose by demoralizing the people it is supposed to inspire.

45. The nautical expression refers to a ship’s taking to oars when the wind fails, and figuratively refers to any second-best course of action, though in this instance it likely refers to the best course of action available to Socrates. Socrates uses the phrase elsewhere (Plt. 300c; Philb. 19c). On the philosophical meaning of the phrase in the Phaedo, see Rose 1966; Shipton 1979; Ross 1982. See also Simmias’ use of a similar figure at 85d.

46. See Sedley forthcoming for a clarifying analysis of this passage, with an emphasis on what Socrates designates as a “safe” premise. Socrates emphasizes safety in dialectic again at 105b.

47. As Blank (1986) argues, Socrates evokes these intellectual villains not as potential debaters so much as bad models of philosophical inquiry, who show symptoms of the “misology” that threatens to infect the minds of his companions, and who had also appeared in Socrates’ discussion of that threat (90b–c).

48. See also 95a–b, where Cebes had used the same language of wonder and admiration in his reaction to Socrates’ rebuttal of Simmias’ argument. That Echecrates expresses admiration for the transparency of a particularly obscure argument in the dialogue has not been lost on scholars, one of whom sees in Echecrates’ “gushing endorsement” proof of the latter’s own intellectual failure and naivete (Gower 2008, 344).
falters. When Socrates and Cebes agree that one of a pair of opposites cannot become the other, an anonymous speaker objects that this principle contradicts the principle of regeneration from opposites established earlier in the conversation (102d–103a). Phaedo refers to the speaker as “one of the listeners present—who it was I don’t clearly remember [οὐ σαφῶς μέμνημαι]” (103a). Phaedo’s failure to recall the speaker’s identity at such a critical moment calls into question the reliability of his entire account, an account that Echecrates had solicited only after ascertaining that Phaedo was an eyewitness to Socrates’ death (57a). Echecrates’ repeated demands for accuracy and precision, and Phaedo’s failure, in this instance, to live up to those demands, reminds us of the inherent weakness of memory. The danger of forgetting or misremembering Socrates makes the memory of Socrates at best an approximation of the man himself, no better than the Homeric eidôlon that dimly reflects the original person, and even worse for its inability to respond to our persistent inquiries. Like the broken record evoked by the critique of writing in the Phaedrus (275d–e), the recollection of Socrates will only repeat the same message, without attuning itself to different interlocutors with different abilities and concerns. When it comes to preserving philosophical conversations, memory suffers from the same shortcomings as a fixed text: it lacks the dynamism and reciprocity of the original exchange, “the living, breathing word [λόγον ... ζῶντα καὶ ἐμψυχον] of him who knows” (276b).

In a characteristically destabilizing manner, Plato has inscribed a figure within the Phaedo that seems to undermine the dialogue’s purpose, which is, one presumes, the commemoration of Socrates and the philosophical education of the reader. Recall, too, that Phaedo makes a point of noting Plato’s absence from the scene of Socrates’ death (“Plato, I think, was ill” [59b]), further distancing us from the ipsissima verba of the master philosopher and deepening our anxiety of having lost access to his redemptive wisdom. In light of Socrates’ inaccessibility, his final instructions to his disciples seem nearly impossible to carry out, and strike a particularly ominous note to the reader who never had unmediated access to him in the first place (115b–c):

By taking care of yourselves you will serve me and mine and yourselves in whatever you do, even if you make no promises now; but if you neglect yourselves and are not willing to live on track, as it were, with our present and past discussions no matter how much or how eagerly you promise now, you will do no good.

The stakes are high and our resources are limited. Because the path to philosophical salvation is delineated by nothing other than the fleeting conversations between Socrates and his inner circle, conversations which Plato has given us ample reason to doubt we can recover, the attempt to successfully tend one’s soul seems all but futile, and the grounds for lamenting the loss of Socrates seem increasingly valid. If we, along with Phaedo and his companions, are true believers in Socratic philosophy, then like his disciples we legitimately grieve

49. On the importance of the objection raised by this speaker, “who seems to be the only one following the conversation with sufficient attention,” see Burger 1999, 164–65.

50. The dialogue’s preoccupation with the limits of memory also surfaces in Simmias’ ironic failure to recollect the argument for recollection (72e–73a).
for ourselves for losing (or lacking) the only person who could show us how to save our immortal souls by becoming “as good and wise as possible.” For without Socrates’ guidance we can easily lose our way, as his disciples have done repeatedly in his presence, and once off the philosophical track we are warned that nothing good can come of anything we do.

What is Plato’s purpose in uncovering this tragic impasse within Socratic philosophy, and how do we understand his own philosophical corpus in light of it? One possibility is that he is leveling a criticism against an unsustainable approach to philosophy that he aims to correct with his own; where Socrates insisted on the living person and the living word to conduct philosophy properly—thus limiting his influence to those lucky enough to have known and conversed with him—Plato allows for the power of the written word to guide, however imperfectly, future philosophical aspirants. The faultiness of memory is less fatal to Plato’s project if preserving a historical moment is not his primary aim, as we must assume given his marked absence, in this case, from the scene that he depicts. The patent fictionality of the *Phaedo* (given the author’s absence from the scene) suggests, rather, that Plato’s aim is to construct a philosophically engaging narrative that avails itself of the figure of Socrates and the issues raised by the occasion of his execution. The most explicit of these themes is the immortality of the soul and the desirability of incorporeal life, which Socrates must prove to deny the tragic view of death and justify his eager anticipation of it. But a subtextual current running throughout the dialogue is the suggestion that Socrates fails to eliminate tragedy from his teachings, not because his arguments for the soul’s immortality are weak (though they are often that), but because his death leaves his survivors philosophically impoverished. The dialogue adopts the perspective of the bereaved to present the death of Socrates as an insurmountable impediment to the philosophical progress of his disciples, whose ability to tend to their own souls is compromised by the loss of the only man who could show them how. By failing to justify his negligence of his intellectual charges or to offer them persuasive assurances that they can continue their philosophical education in his absence, Socrates legitimates their grief and thus fails on his own terms to eliminate tragedy from his philosophical worldview. Plato thus reveals the limits of Socratic philosophy, dependent as it is on the charisma and intellectual power of a single, extraordinary individual who is (was) not long for this world.

The *Phaedo*, then, appears to be work of tragic philosophy. But it is worth noting that the dialogue contains features of a conventional tragedy as well, which is arguably the true source of its literary power and further complicates our understanding of Plato’s motives in writing it. For it is evident from Phaedo’s account that, much as he wants to believe in Socrates’ arguments for the soul’s immortality and adopt Socrates’ joy at the prospect of escaping the prison of earthly life, he cannot relinquish his attachment to the physical person of Socrates, to his living presence as a unique, embodied individual. Phaedo’s keen

51. As Halliwell (1994, 56) puts it, the *Phaedo* raises the possibility that “the execution of Socrates is an unredeemed waste of life’s value.”
52. See Halliwell 1994, 56–57 and Jansen 2013 on the tragic conventions that Plato deploys in the dialogue.
sensitivity to the body of Socrates in the philosopher’s final hours reveals a longing for the physical nearness and intimacy of a beloved person more in line with traditional perspectives on the value of human relationships, and it is to this tragic dimension of the dialogue that I briefly want to turn, in order to suggest that Socrates, as the object of his disciples’ philosophical eros, represents a paradox, an example, if you will, of a perishable Form. Conversing with Socrates approximates the experience of communing with Forms, making him an intensely beloved object to the philosophical lover; the erotic attraction to Socrates’ mind, however, resists sublimation, because it is tethered to Socrates’ idiosyncratic personality, and by extension his unique, physical person. There is an ineliminable tension, then, between Socrates’ alienation from his own body, which merely obstructs the power of his mind, and the preciousness of that very body to Phaedo and the other disciples, who can only access Socrates’ singular, superior mind through his singular, perishable body.

We learn from Phaedo that Socrates remains almost motionless for the duration of the discussion (61c–d), a posture reflective of the philosopher’s emotional composure and conscious preparation for the disembodiment of death. But Socrates remains a living body, and his corpse-like pose only makes Phaedo more attuned to the slightest signs of organic life in him. Phaedo relates to Echecrates the smallest details of Socrates’ physical comportment: the philosopher raises his legs and rubs his ankles after the fetters have been removed (60b), lays his feet back down on the ground to assume a stationary, seated position for the rest of the conversation (61c–d), and at one point cocks his head in surprise at the astute observation of an anonymous speaker (103a). Phaedo frequently makes note of Socrates’ “customary” looks and manners, his smiles and gentle laughter (84d, 86d, 117b). The minuteness of these gestures serves to set the major movements of Socrates’ body in high relief, particularly in his final moments, as he walks about the cell until the poison takes its paralyzing effect and finally kills him (117e–118a). A striking moment also occurs in the middle of the discussion, when Socrates directs his physical attention to Phaedo himself. After Simmias and Cebes’ objections seem to have dealt a death blow to Socrates’ case for the immortality of the soul, leaving everyone present confounded, Phaedo marvels that Socrates is able to help them find their way again. How did he do it? asks Echecrates. Phaedo responds (89b–c):

I will tell you. I happened to be sitting at his right on a low stool beside the couch, and he was seated much higher than I was. He stroked my head and gathered together the hair at my neck (for he had a habit, now and then, of playing with my hair), saying “Tomorrow, perhaps, Phaedo, you will cut off this beautiful hair.”

“So it seems, Socrates,” I said.

“Not if you listen to me.”

“What then?” I asked.

“You should cut it today,” he said, “and I will cut mine, if our argument dies and we cannot bring it back to life. If I were you, at least, and the argument escaped me, I would swear an oath like the Argives do, not to let my hair grow until I fought back and prevailed over the argument of Simmias and Cebes.”
Phaedo’s keen recollection of this moment, which is extraneous to the argument that Echecrates requests to hear, is an indication of its preciousness to him; it is a memory Phaedo seems to cherish and linger over to recall the sensation of Socrates’ touch. That Socrates was in the habit of touching him with such tenderness comes as a surprise, especially given the force of the philosopher’s rejection of all things physical, and his wariness of the temptation presented by human attachment. Nevertheless, Socrates indulges in the pleasure of stroking Phaedo’s hair, admires its beauty, and seems to mourn its imminent loss with the funeral custom of shearing hair. Despite Socrates’ attempt to deflate the gesture with irony—Phaedo should shear his hair in mourning for the death of their argument rather than the death of Socrates—the lapse in Socrates’ asceticism still humanizes the philosopher, and evokes a physical dimension to his friendships that memories of philosophical conversations normally occlude or exclude altogether. But it is a dimension that Phaedo, however philosophically inclined, cannot seem (and does not want) to forget.

Phaedo’s protracted recollection of Socrates’ fleeting moment of tenderness reveals an asymmetry of affection we know characterized other relationships between Socrates and his admirers, most notably Alcibiades. But whereas in the Symposium Socrates is criticized for his cold indifference to the aching body of his lover (217e–219d), in the Phaedo Socrates exhibits this callousness with regard to his own body, which he views with extreme alterity, if not downright hostility. When he is not lamenting the obstruction it poses to philosophical activity, he is marveling at the sensations emanating from his body as if from some foreign, external source, and he explicitly objects to the mistaken identification of his body with his person. In his critique of natural philosophy, Socrates uses a materialist description of his body as a foil for his own self-understanding as an intellectual and ethical agent, whose embodiment is only a contingent property of his identity; Socrates “bones and sinews,” he argues, are in no meaningful sense “causes” of Socrates’ action or adequate descriptions of his person (Phd. 98c–99d). Socrates must remind Crito of this point when the latter dutifully requests burial instructions (115c–116a):

“But how should we bury you?”

“However you wish,” [Socrates] replied, “if you can catch me and I do not get away from you.” And with a gentle laugh and a glance at us he said, “I cannot persuade Crito, my friends, that I am this very Socrates who is now conversing and laying out each of his arguments. He thinks I am that one whom he will soon see as a corpse, and he asks how to bury me. And

53. It is worth noting that Phaedo is a young man of roughly twenty at the time of Socrates’ death, and famed for his beauty. We are told, furthermore, that Socrates secured Phaedo’s freedom from slavery and prostitution after the latter had been captured as a prisoner of war, a fact that suggests a strong bond between the two; see Nails 2002, s.v. “Phaedo.”

54. Socrates deliberately inverts the epic conception of selfhood, which views the body as “the most authentic part of the individual, the part that identifies it most wholly, even when it has become inert matter” (Mirto 2012, 14; see also Garland 1985, 1–2). Socrates’ emphasis here on bones and sinews recalls in particular the description of the soul given to Odysseus by the shade of his mother after his repeated attempts to embrace her fail: “For the sinews no longer hold the flesh and bones together, but the powerful force of the blazing fire destroys them, and once the spirit [θυμός] leaves behind the white bones, the soul [ψυχὴ], like a dream, fits about and flies away” (Od. 11.219–22). In Homer, the flesh and sinews are what constitute a person, while the soul is the insubstantial remainder.
though I have been arguing at great length that after I drink the poison I will no longer remain among you, but will depart to those happy states of the blessed, he thinks that I am speaking idle talk in an attempt to comfort you as well as myself. Therefore," he said, "give surety for me to Crito, the opposite of the surety he tried to give to my judges; for he pledged that I would remain, while you must pledge that I will not remain when I die, but that I'll be gone, so that Crito will bear it more easily, and not grieve for me when he sees my body being burned or buried, thinking that I am suffering something terrible, and so that he will not say at the funeral that he is laying out Socrates, or carrying him forth, or burying him. For know well, dear Crito, that such ill speech in this matter not only is erroneous, but infects souls with evil. No, you must take heart, and say that you bury my body, and bury it as you prefer and as you think most appropriate."

Crito misspoke when he identified the “you” of Socrates with the body that must be handled and ultimately disposed of after Socrates’ execution, and this slip into conventional ways of speaking reflects a conventional way of thinking that stubbornly resists Socratic persuasion. Crito continues to ascribe value to what Socrates has spent the last hours of his life denouncing: his body. In his attempt to correct and reassure Crito, Socrates voices a suspicion no doubt held by many of those present (and many who were not) that the dying philosopher’s arguments for the soul’s immortality have been fabricated to ease their grief at his passing and allay his own fear of death. Socrates insists, however, that this suspicion is mistaken, indeed fatal to one’s philosophical aspirations. Crito must speak properly and recognize that what he buries is not his beloved friend but inert matter, and must treat that matter accordingly.

But Crito, for all his philosophical obtuseness, makes a genuine effort to extend some kind of care to Socrates, and to fulfill the office of a friend as this office is traditionally understood. The problem is that Socrates’ understanding of friendship as the common pursuit of knowledge with the ultimate aim of intellectual independence—as a social means, in other words, to an asocial end—departs radically from the conventional view of friendship as a fundamentally reciprocal and mutually dependent exchange of care over the course of a shared life, an exchange which often culminates, upon the death of one friend, with the ritual tendance of the corpse by the other. Socrates’ essential autonomy and religious heterodoxy make it difficult, if not impossible, to reciprocate his intellectual generosity, and this asymmetry leaves the disciples who have come to love him at a loss. They gain much from their interactions with a man who gains far less, and while the economy of this exchange would seem to serve the recipient of Socratic wisdom, the recipient becomes crippled by a debt that cannot be repayed and by a love that cannot be reciprocated. Crito, in a characteristically pragmatic fashion, does what he can to repay Socrates, and while Socrates would seem to deny any meaning to the gesture, he nevertheless acquiesces, allowing Crito to oversee his burial (115e–116a), conveying his final instructions to his household women in Crito’s presence alone (116b), and directing his final words to Crito specifically, exhorting him not to be “careless” of one final religious duty

55. On the role of reciprocity in Greek conceptions of friendship, see Berkel 2010 and Konstan 1998.
56. On Crito’s preoccupations with practical matters in the dialogue, see Rowe 1993, 291–92.
Such gestures on Socrates’ part suggest that he recognizes and concedes to Crito’s need to reciprocate Socrates’ friendship.57 Socrates’ efforts to fortify his disciples fail in the end; once he begins the physical process of dying, they can no longer suppress their urge to grieve (117c). Crito must temporarily flee the scene, Phaedo hides his weeping face in his cloak, and Apollodorus, who appeared early on as the most emotionally distraught of those present (59a–b), laments uncontrollably, breaking down the shaky resolve of the remaining companions. Socrates chides them all for their feminine display of mourning, and calmly walks the cell until his limbs grow heavy and stiff. Phaedo tracks the course of the poison as it travels through Socrates’ prostrate body, which the drug administrator clinically tests for sign of feeling: he pinches Socrates’ foot, his legs, his groin, “and going up in this way he showed us that [Socrates] was growing cold and rigid” (118a). We watch as Socrates turns into a corpse before our very eyes, yet unsettlingly affirms in speech the effects of rigor mortis on his own body (117e). Even as the paralysis creeps toward his heart, Socrates remains lucid and unflappable; his last words are maddeningly banal (“Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. Pay it and do not neglect it,” 118a).58 Socrates is present while he retains the faculty of speech, an expression of his mind at work; once Socrates stops speaking, he is gone. Phaedo notes that the body moves moments after Socrates fails to reply to Crito’s question, as if to reflect in this sequence the metaphysical priority of Socrates’ speaking mind over his feeling body.59

The final scene of the Phaedo, where philosophical arguments (and philosophical myths) give way to narrative action, suspense, and a fatal resolution, approaches conventional tragedy more than any other in the platonic corpus. Socrates himself heralds the dialogue’s tragic turn when he announces “like a tragic man [ἀ νὴρ τραγικός] would say” that he is called to meet his fate (115a). But Plato’s insistence on making us witness Socrates’ moment of death conspicuously flouts the tragic convention of keeping death offstage,60 and in violating this modicum of tragic decorum, violates the Republic’s prohibition against courting grief in the audience of poetic productions more egregiously than tragedy itself. What is Plato up to? Does he share Socrates’ instructive purpose, who seems to use his own death to test the philosophical mettle of his companions (as well as his own success at persuading them)? Plato forces his reader to confront what tragedy

57. Many thanks to Luke Parker for his insights on the care exchanged in the final interactions between Crito and Socrates, and in particular for pointing out the ways Socrates allows Crito to reciprocate care.
58. The meaning of Socrates’ enigmatic last request has been hotly contested, but the general consensus is that the ascetic philosopher is thanking the god of healing preemptively for curing him from the “sickness” of life; for a survey of interpretations, see Rowe (1993, 295–96), who takes the majority view; Most (1993), who argues that Socrates refers in these lines to the recovery of his philosophical heir Plato; and Wilson (2007, 114–18), who suggests that Socrates invokes Asclepius as a god of childbirth aiding the philosopher in giving birth to his own death. Whatever Socrates may have meant, Crito, as Wilson (2007, 114) points out, is not satisfied: “he demands, but does not receive, ‘something else.’” Most readers feel the same frustration.
59. The narrative of the dialogue reflects this metaphysical priority as well: “The text itself ends when the master is silent” (Wilson 2007, 108).
60. I am grateful to Mark Payne for pointing out the Phaedo’s inversion of tragic practice. For reasons that remain contested, all but four out of twenty-five extant Greek tragedies avoid representing the moment of death on stage, though it is worth noting, as Pathmanathan (1965, 2–3) does, that Aristotle does not acknowledge a prohibition against this practice, and in fact suggests it as one among many means of arousing pathos (Poet. 1452b12–13).
itself recoiled from depicting without mediation: the termination of life. An eyewitness account of this termination was, in fact, what Echecrates specifically requested from Phaedo at the beginning of the dialogue: “What did the man say before his death? And how did he die?” (57a). But Echecrates’ curiosity may well be as base and morbid as Leontius’ appetitive desire in the Republic to gaze at the corpses of criminals (439e–440a). It may be a lust for spectacle and gossip, or the pathological indulgence of grief, rather than a philosophical desire for knowledge, that motivates the demand to hear and see Socrates die. In satisfying him, Phaedo may well be pandering as only the worst of mimetic poets do—and Plato, alarmingly, may be guilty of the same charge.

But in contrast to the graphic and gruesome deaths of epic, or even the reported deaths of tragedy (which, as Lessing might argue, surpass the limits of visual mimesis in evoking the limitless horror of the imagination), the death of Socrates is markedly unspectacular. No blood or gore, no violent spasms or outbursts; just the slow and inexorable withdrawal of life from the body of a single, albeit singular, human being, surrounded by other human beings who struggle to accept the transformation of a once-beloved body, infused with intellectual life, into an insensible piece of matter. The objectification of Socrates’ body is, on the one hand, a symbol of its ultimate irrelevance, a dispensable lower rung on the ladder of philosophical ascent. From this perspective, Plato seems to violate tragic decorum in order to divest death of horror and render it appropriately banal. On the other hand, this lifeless and thoughtless body of Socrates leaves those who can no longer ascend the ladder without Socrates’ living guidance stranded. As we saw in the case of Achilles’ reluctance to bury Patroclus, the slow pace of Socrates’ death reflects the survivors’ desire to prolong the period of shared life with him, to delay, however briefly, the termination not of Socrates’ life, but of Socrates’ friendship. The unspectacular banality of Socrates’ physical death cannot suppress the tragic consequences of his death for the bereaved.

Does the Phaedo succeed in meeting the Republic’s challenge? Does it succeed in representing a philosophical disposition that moves a philosophical audience, or is the existence of a tragic bind in the philosophical life, the imperfect condition of the disciple striving to live such a life, and the mortality of an extraordinary and extraordinarily beloved philosopher the source of the dialogue’s affective success? Socrates does face his impending death with tranquility and equanimity. Socrates’ friends, for the most part, do suppress their urge to grieve, but the urge remains, and surfaces at crucial moments that humanize the dialogue and make it, in the end, a work of tragedy. The crucial difference between the Phaedo and conventional tragedy is the dialogue’s self-awareness as a philosophical failure on the one hand, insofar as it cannot depict an undisturbed response to the death of Socrates, and its philosophical awareness of a failure within Socratic philosophy on the other, insofar as it highlights the impoverished intellectual condition of Socrates’ disciples in his absence. The Phaedo’s focus on the survivors as those who legitimately suffer a misfortune challenges Socrates’

61. I make the case elsewhere that Leontius’ appetitive desire is not as morbid as it first appears, but manifests the same desire to grieve that afflicts the bereaved and the tragic audience: see Liebert 2013.
“repudiation of the tragic,”

for it suggests that a tragic bind can be generated by philosophical commitments; but the dialogue’s use of conventional tragedy to lend force to the plight of the survivor reinforces the Republic’s claim that philosophical tranquility is, indeed, inimitable and unmoving. The Phaedo may convince us that Socrates goes to a better place, and we may even celebrate his departure to greener pastures, but the fact remains that those who remain are bereft of an edifying presence in their life, and this loss may injure them in a way Socratic philosophy would concede. The dialogue thus questions what debt the philosopher owes his disciples and to what extent they are justified in grieving over their own impoverished state. For if they are justified, then the Phaedo succeeds in moving us for the same reasons that conventional tragic poetry succeeds in moving us: because it gives us something to grieve for.

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62. To use Halliwell’s phrase; see n. 14 above.

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