

Plato's *Phaedo*

A mini-course

The *Phaedo* is traditionally considered as a dialogue on the immortality of the soul. Despite the setting (the last day of Socrates' life in prison) and the series of arguments on the immortality of the soul that form its backbone, the dialogue lends itself to a more secular reading: Plato uses Socrates' death as an occasion to describe the field of philosophy as he himself conceives it, and to demarcate it from a number of other intellectual activities --in which the historical Socrates was possibly involved-- that range from 'antilogic' to divination.

1. Only *logoi* left alive: toward a secular reading of the *Phaedo*

The arguments for the immortality of the soul form the backbone of the *Phaedo*. But is the proof of immortality the aim of Plato in this dialogue? Starting from the 'misology digression' (86c-91c) and drawing on recent scholarship regarding the philosophical importance of this section we will discuss a different reading of the dialogue, in which Plato's interest is not so much to prove the immortality of the soul but rather to secure the 'sustainability' of the project of philosophy --as opposed to 'antilogic'-- and at the same time to claim the 'brand name' of his teacher Socrates. As we shall see, this enterprise involves an argument that shows how --at least Plato's-- Socrates differs from other *antilogikoi*.

2. Socrates the shaman? The 'mystic' background of the *Phaedo*

The *Phaedo* is a text full of Orphic, Pythagorean, and Eleusinian allusions. Scarcity of evidence prevents us from demarcating and fully grasping the content of the relevant doctrines. But any interpretation of the *Phaedo* must take into account the presence of these allusions: What do they tell us with respect to the question of authority of 'pre-philosophical', semi-religious doctrines, against which Plato attempts to establish and to claim his own, new philosophical enterprise? And how is the historical Socrates (to the extent it can be reconstructed) but also Plato's persona of his teacher related to such 'movements'?

To what extent does this account of Socrates undermine Plato's commitment to a fully rational way of practicing philosophy?

3. Who is shaking the waters of Euripus? Philosophical polemic in the second voyage

Socrates' criticism to the *antilogikoi* occurs in the beginning of a long section of the *Phaedo* that is marked by a second reference to these otherwise unnamed individuals (101e). That Plato understands this passage as a single section is clear from his choice to mark its beginning and end with two interruptions from Echekrates (which bring the narrative back to the original frame in Phleious). What is less clear, however, is a sense of unity that Plato must have intended to give among the different parts of Socrates' speech in this section, which includes some very important and famous passages, such as the second voyage and Socrates' intellectual autobiography. Paying closer attention to the puzzles that led Socrates to embark to his second voyage and to their similarity with certain paradoxes raised in the Socratic tradition we will attempt to find a single thread that runs through this section, and to give an answer to the question of the identity of the *antilogikoi*.

4. A penthouse for philosophers? The final myth of the *Phaedo*

The final myth of the *Phaedo* suggests a certain hierarchical topography of the souls. Those who have lived pious lives are the ones that enjoy real freedom from 'earthly affairs'. Among them, philosophers are described as the only people who, having been purified in their lives through the practice of philosophy 'live thereafter entirely without bodies' (114c). Although this statement occurs in the mythical section, it raises some interesting questions about the overall scope of the dialogue: Does Plato want his readers to reflect on the afterlife of the soul in general or is he rather interested to promote the model of a particular type of life, that is, the life of the philosopher, which can also be seen as a preparation for death (*melete thanatou* 81a)? To what extent does the latter idea -- along the lines of a well-known interpretation of the dialogue-- commit Plato to a pessimistic attitude toward life?

Please bring with you a copy of the *Phaedo* (in translation).
Recommended: Plato. *Meno and Phaedo*, translated by A. Lond,
edited by D. Sedley, CUP, 2010.

Knowledge of Greek is desired but not required.

Select bibliography:

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- Janko, R. "Socrates the Free Thinker". In *A Companion to Socrates*, S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar, eds., Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Menn, S. "On Socrates' Objections to the Physicists (*Phaedo* 95e8-97b7)" *OSAP* 38.2010: 37-68.
- Morgan, K. "The voice of authority: Divination and Plato's *Phaedo*" *CQ* 60 (2010).
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- Radcliffe, G. Edmonds III, *Myths of the Underworld Journey. Plato. Aristophanes, and the Orphic 'Gold' Tablets* (esp. ch. 4), 2004.
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- Sedley, D. *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity*. University of California Press, 2007 (esp. chapter III, sections 2-4).
- Taylor, C.C.W. "Socrates the Sophist". In *Remembering Socrates*, L. Judson and V. Karasmanis, eds., Clarendon Press, 2006.

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