

The Dramatis Personae of Plato's *Phaedo*

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I

SOCRATES WAS NOT THE FIRST PERSON to conduct a philosophical dialogue, nor was Plato the first to commit one to writing. But thanks to Plato's unique talents as a dramatist, a philosophical explorer and a prose artist, it is his portrayals of Socrates in conversation that have set the standard for the genre. If Plato's subtlety in the manipulation of this art form is unequalled, one reason will be that for him dialogue *is* philosophy. Even 'dialectic', his term for correct philosophical method, means quite literally the science of conducting a dialogue.

There is a familiar picture of Plato's philosophical development, from an early phase devoted largely to depiction of his teacher Socrates, through a middle phase dominated by his own theory of Forms, and into a late phase in which old ideas are rethought with the help of new perspectives and methodologies. It is a familiar fact, too, that the dialogue form itself alters. In the early phase we get the unforgettable warts-and-all depiction of Socrates probing the beliefs, lives and value systems of those he meets, and leaving them humbled, enlightened, or more often simply frustrated. Later we tend to find Socrates — or whoever

replaces him as main speaker — using his interlocutors as partners in the development of his own constructive proposals.

Interwoven with these familiar developments there is another one, which is rarely considered in its own right, but which, if I am not mistaken, adds yet another dimension to this multi-dimensional medium. My discussion will concentrate on Plato's actual casting of both the leading and the subordinate characters.¹

II

Although the main focus will be on Simmias and Cebes, let me begin with another pair of interlocutors, Glaucon and Adimantus. They were Plato's brothers, and, as is well known, they are Socrates' principal interlocutors throughout most of the *Republic*. And the principal aim of the *Republic* is to demonstrate the advantages of being just, via the construction of an ideal city.

I wonder if anyone has ever noticed how each of the two is on just one occasion named by Socrates with his patronymic, 'son of Ariston'. Both addresses occur at pivotal points, and both times Socrates also generously bestows on the brother in question the credit for their findings. In book IV (427c6–d1), on completing his construction of the ideal city, Socrates observes to Adimantus 'Well then, son of Ariston, your city would by now be founded.' And in Book IX, at the climactic moment of his entire argument, Socrates asks Glaucon a question which encapsulates its conclusion (580c): 'Shall we hire a herald, or shall I myself announce it? That the son of Ariston judged the best and most just person the happiest — that is, the most kingly, and king of himself . . .'

Dramatically speaking, the 'son of Ariston' is Adimantus on the first occasion, Glaucon on the second. But to contemporary readers this patronymic (the ancient Greek equivalent of a surname) surely signified above all their more famous brother,

¹ I am grateful for comments received from many participants at the British Academy colloquium on Philosophical Dialogues, and also to Theodor Ebert and Myles Burnyeat for detailed criticisms of an earlier draft.

Plato himself. And it must above all else be Plato's own moment of glory that is being celebrated here when the *Republic's* triumphant conclusions are attributed to the 'son of Ariston'.

Once we appreciate this, we can start to see the subtlety of Plato's concealed self-reference. Dramatically, it is Socrates who has worked to achieve the conclusions, while Glaucon and Adimantus have played the subordinate role of respondents. Thus Socrates' gift of the dialogue's philosophical fruits to them is, on the surface, wildly overgenerous, not to say ironic. But at the authorial level, the credits are reversed. It is indeed Plato, the son of Ariston, who has guided his revered teacher Socrates to his final vindication of justice — above all by harnessing to the task his own theory of Forms and doctrine of the tripartite soul. This gift of the theory of Forms to Socrates was one which Plato never revoked, either through good times (as in the *Republic*) or through bad (as in the *Parmenides*). That is to say, Socrates continued to be its primary spokesman in the dialogues.

What we have witnessed here is one simple way in which the interaction of primary and secondary characters in a dialogue can help Plato to project his own authorial voice.² Another aspect of the same phenomenon can be located in his growing readiness, after the *Republic*, to put Socrates in the passenger seat. In the *Timaeus*, Socrates sits at the feet of Timaeus, apparently a Pythagorean, to learn from him a systematic account of the world

² Here and elsewhere I am rather more inclined to detect Plato's authorial voice than is Michael Frede in his brilliant study 'Plato's arguments and the dialogue form', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, suppl. vol. (1992), 201–19: 'Plato even in the least aporetic and most dogmatic dialogues remains at a radical distance from the views and arguments of the fictional character of the dialogue' (p. 214). His defence of this finding is highly illuminating with regard to the aporetic dialogues, but I am reluctant to believe that we have been entirely mistaken all these centuries to read off a 'Platonist' ethics, psychology or metaphysics from the post-aporetic dialogues. In practice, it is often virtually impossible not to assume the identity of Plato's own views with those implicit in the questions asked by his leading speaker — as does Frede himself, for example, in an article published in the same year, 'The *Sophist* on false statements', in R. Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge, 1992), 397–424.

as the product of a divine intelligence. This recasting of the players, with Socrates relegated to a passive role, must reflect Plato's recognition that his Socratic heritage was insufficient to ground such a project in teleological science, and that he must now draw on Pythagoreanism in order to make new headway. And this same idea, that of selecting speakers as representatives of philosophical traditions, became a major formative feature of Plato's late dialogues. In particular, although he did return to the exploration of his Socratic heritage in the *Philebus*, he was elsewhere much exercised with the legacy of Eleatic philosophy. Parmenides, in the dialogue named after him, leads the discussion, and offers the young Socrates a demonstration lesson in the rigorous analytical methodology which he will need in order to defend his theory of Forms adequately. And when Parmenides' follower, the unnamed Stranger from Elea, takes over the role of questioner in the *Sophist*, leaving Socrates a silent onlooker, it is no doubt the rigour and precision of Eleatic methodology that are once again being brought to the fore.

In Plato's late work, then, the choice of speakers had a largely symbolic value, representing his carefully thought-out apportionment of philosophical debts — what we might now call an assignment of intellectual copyright. This contrasts with his early dialogues, where speakers had been chosen either as proponents of views to which Socrates was hostile — e.g. Callicles, Protagoras — or as typifying those opinionated but confused individuals whose value systems constituted natural targets for the Socratic elenchus — e.g. Euthyphro, Meno. Where and how did the transition occur between the earlier and the later methods of character-selection? In Plato's great central work, the *Republic*, symbolic character-choice had not yet become an established or prominent part of his dramatic technique. In the punning use of 'son of Ariston' which I have described we are still witnessing the process of its birth. Nevertheless it is my contention — and this will be the main theme of my paper — that that birth process had started a little earlier still, in the *Phaedo*.

To make the idea palatable, let me select an example which

connects the *Phaedo* to one of the dialogues I have already mentioned. At *Phaedo* 96–99 Socrates chronicles his own early aspirations in natural science. When he heard that Anaxagoras called Intelligence the cause of everything, he thought that he had at last found what he was looking for — someone who would explain the world's structure teleologically. But when he came to read Anaxagoras' book, Socrates was bitterly disappointed: the author did nothing to explain what was 'best' about the way Intelligence organised the world. In closing the episode, Socrates remarks (99c), 'To learn this kind of cause, I would gladly become anybody's pupil.' It is not surprising that some have mistranslated this as 'I would gladly *have* become anybody's pupil', implying an unfulfilled condition in the past. For Socrates is in his death cell with barely an hour to live, and it seems an odd time to be making plans, even hypothetically, for future science lessons.³ But that is what the Greek clearly implies, and the mystery is largely dispelled once we see that the future project is really not Socrates', but Plato's. The authorial voice is addressing us directly.⁴ It is Plato who is already scheduling a future dialogue in which Socrates will become someone's pupil in order to learn teleological science. This can be confidently asserted with the wisdom of hindsight, because as it happens Plato did live to write that dialogue, and it is called the *Timaeus*. There Socrates, just as he envisages in the *Phaedo*, becomes the pupil of Timaeus and learns

³ Nor, I think is Socrates envisaging a future lesson from one of the 'better people' he will meet in Hades (63b). The prospect of such encounters is repeated from the *Apology* (cf. the reference to the *Apology* at 63b4–5, 69d7–e5), perhaps largely for consistency, but with explicitly much less confidence than his new expectation of entering divine company (63b–c). And the closing myth leaves no place for such personal encounters in Hades. I take this new emphasis to be a move towards reinterpreting the traditional Hades mythology as symbolising radical disembodiment after death.

⁴ I have developed this point, with reference to the present passage and to the myth, in 'Teleology and myth in the *Phaedo*', *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, 5 (1989). That even Socrates' celebrated dying words in the *Phaedo* are a concealed reference to Plato's succession is now brilliantly demonstrated by G. W. Most, 'A cock for Asclepius'. *Classical Quarterly*, 43 (1993), 96–111.

how the world can be explained as the product of Intelligence. That such a science would have to be drawn from outside Plato's Socratic legacy is, as I have said, announced by the choice of the new principal speaker Timaeus, seemingly a Pythagorean. But we can now see that even as early as the *Phaedo* Plato was acknowledging that this project, when its time came, would require some non-Socratic input from a new principal speaker. In the event this proved to be primarily, though not exclusively, his *mathematical* analyses of cosmic structures, which undoubtedly owed much to Pythagoreanism.

III

Now at last I can turn fully to the *dramatis personae* of the *Phaedo*. The *Phaedo* takes the form of a narrated dialogue encased in a 'frame' dialogue between Phaedo and his friend Echecrates at Phlius. Phaedo is recounting to Echecrates Socrates' final conversation in the hours before his execution. Not only had Phaedo and Echecrates hitherto been unfamiliar to Plato's readers, but even the two main interlocutors of the narrated dialogue, Simmias and Cebes, had barely received a mention in his previous work.⁵ How is this choice of principal characters to be explained? Leaving aside the remote possibility that Plato was simply constrained by historical fact, we must consider instead the case for interpreting his choice of speakers as *symbolic*.

First Phaedo. He is not only the narrator but also an interlocutor at one crucial point. Phaedo became, we know, an independent philosopher with his own school at Elis. In his celebrated dialogue the *Zopyrus*,⁶ an eminent physiognomist, whose science

⁵ Only in fact at *Crito* 45b. However, they are presented as long-standing associates of Socrates (*Phd.* 72e), and this receives some confirmation from Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.2.48 and 3.11.17.

⁶ For evidence see L. Rossetti, *Hermes*, 108 (1980), 183–98, and G. Giannantoni, *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae* (Naples, 1990), vol. 4, 125–6. This explanation of Phaedo's role was, I think, first suggested to me by Myles Burnyeat.

claimed to be able to tell people's character from their physique, pronounced Socrates (a) stupid, and (b) a womaniser. No doubt the laughable inappropriateness of both verdicts was used by Phaedo to stress how Socrates' intellect had achieved such mastery that he could defeat what were taken to be standard laws of body-soul interaction. If that was Phaedo's message, Plato's choice of him as narrator for Socrates' death scene looks like the acknowledgement of a philosophical kinship: the philosophical soul's liberation from the body, even in this life, is a pivotal theme of the *Phaedo* too.

In the opening 'frame dialogue', Phaedo is questioned by Echecrates about the scene in Socrates' death cell. Their exchange is extraordinarily geographical. As well as mentions of Athens, Phlius, Delos and Crete, there is talk of the whereabouts on that day of various leading members of the Socratic circle — those present included certain people from Thebes, and others from Megara, but yet others were said to be away in Aegina. The familiar Aegean world is being carefully spread out before us like a map. Are these just tiresome preliminaries, or is some point being made? A point is being made, I believe, but this emerges only at the end of the dialogue in Socrates' eschatological myth. The myth purports to be a lesson in true geography. The entire Mediterranean occupies a tiny hollow in the earth's surface, around which we live 'like ants or frogs round a pool' (109a-b). There are other zones, both below and above our level, to which souls pass at the appropriate stages of their purification, until they are finally altogether purged of their bodily leanings. In this way, the familiar but morally insignificant horizontal geography evoked at the beginning of the dialogue is to be replaced at the end by the myth's new vertical geography, one which will provide the necessary context for understanding the soul's destiny. Before the dialogue has even got under way, then, the cast list is being manipulated for symbolic rather than narrowly dramatic purposes.

IV

But it is on Simmias and Cebes that I want now to concentrate. Both are Thebans, who, although members of the Socratic circle, have also studied with the eminent Pythagorean Philolaus in their native city, and can to that extent be seen as Pythagoreans of a sort. In the frame dialogue too, Echecrates is known to have been a Pythagorean and disciple of Philolaus.⁷ And it is a familiar point that, in a dialogue about the immortality of the soul, Pythagoreans have an obvious appropriateness, since the soul's immortality and transmigration were the oldest and best attested of all the doctrines associated with their school. So is the presence of Simmias and Cebes symbolic, Plato's acknowledgement of his debt to Pythagoreanism on the issue? At best this will prove to be a half truth.

On the one hand, it can hardly be doubted that Plato *was* in the debt of the Pythagoreans. In his early work, from the *Apology* to the *Symposium*, he had shown no strong inclination to believe the soul immortal. In the *Apology* (40c ff.) Socrates is explicitly agnostic on the matter, and even in the *Symposium* personal immortality is implicitly excluded: there (207ff.) Socrates quotes with approval how the priestess Diotima taught him that all living things crave immortality, but that the nearest they come to it is by procreation, whether biological or intellectual. This would be a simple falsehood if immortality were already, as the *Phaedo* holds, an inalienable part of the soul's nature. The doctrine of personal immortality really does seem to be a later development, stemming from Plato's contact with Pythagoreans during his first visit to Sicily.

On the other hand, Plato's presentation of Simmias and Cebes would be a very strange way of acknowledging the debt. Despite their Pythagorean background, they come to the discussion far from convinced of the soul's ability to survive death, and their doubts are eloquently developed in the main body of the dia-

⁷ Diogenes Laertius 8.46.

logue. Although as accepted members of the Socratic circle these two cannot be assumed to speak with a consistently Pythagorean voice, Plato assures us that their doubts *are* the direct result of their Pythagorean background, by portraying the undilutedly Pythagorean Echecrates in the frame dialogue as fully and explicitly sharing those same doubts (88c-e). In short, what we meet in the *Phaedo* is the paradoxical spectacle of Socrates having to persuade the Pythagoreans of the truth of their own doctrine.

The shortcomings of Simmias' and Cebes' Pythagorean training emerge at the very first reference to it. At 61d Cebes is surprised to hear Socrates approve of the prohibition on suicide. 'Why?' says Socrates. 'Haven't you and Simmias heard about such things through your association with Philolaus?' 'Nothing clear', is his reply. Whereupon it is left to Socrates to reconstruct the reasoning behind the prohibition.

Later, Simmias expresses doubt about Socrates' proofs of immortality, because he accepts the thesis that soul is 'harmony', that is, that the soul stands to the body as a musical harmony or attunement stands to the tuned musical instrument — in which case, he observes, it could no more survive the destruction of the body than the attunement can outlive the tuned instrument.

The ownership of the harmony thesis is left vague. On the one hand, Simmias speaks of it as what 'we' say (86b), surely meaning the circle of Philolaus⁸ — especially as in the frame dialogue the Pythagorean Echecrates admits his own long-standing allegiance to the same doctrine. The notion of harmony plays a key role in Philolaus' metaphysics, and there is good reason to agree with Carl Huffman's conclusion, in his recent magisterial

⁸ The context excludes the purely formal possibilities that 'we' might mean either people in general or the circle of Socrates. That leaves us with a reference either to Simmias and Cebes or, more broadly, to the Theban circle they belong to. The latter seems likelier, since, even supposing that Cebes was once wedded to the theory, he no longer is now (87a), so that he might have been expected to object if he had understood Simmias to be implicating him.

study of Philolaus, that the doctrine of soul as harmony was indeed his.⁹

On the other hand, the thesis is described by Simmias (92d) as something that 'most people' believe — which, whether or not an exaggeration, is hardly a way of claiming it as exclusive Pythagorean property. And, worse, he himself introduces it explicitly as conflicting with the doctrine of the soul's survival after death — an inalienable part of Pythagorean thought.

These are real problems, but we should not be too ready to conclude that the doctrine cannot after all have had a Pythagorean pedigree.¹⁰ The conflict between the harmony doctrine and that of transmigration is not beyond dispute. Empedocles, at least, had apparently been ready to espouse versions of both theories.¹¹ Even if the soul is taken, as it is by the harmony doctrine, to have nothing more than formal existence, as a balanced interrelation between certain bodily elements, it does not follow that it cannot be transferred from one body to another. We could, for example, think of it as transferable in the way that computer data can be transferred from one disk to another. But Philolaus' testimonia and fragments reveal no interest on his part in developing the Pythagorean transmigration doctrine (albeit none in rejecting it either). It is likely that he said little to resolve the issue.

If we retain the assumption that the thesis has a Philolaic origin, we have here another case in which Plato wants us to see how inadequately Pythagoreanism has prepared his speakers for appreciation of the soul's immortality. It has even seduced them with a theory of mind which, while conforming to Pythagorean methods of mathematical analysis, scarcely encourages belief in the soul's separability from the body.

⁹ C. Huffman, *Philolaus of Croton* (Cambridge, 1993). See further, 'Appendix' below.

¹⁰ As regards the theory's appeal to 'most people', see note 14 below.

¹¹ Cf. J. Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London, 1979), vol. 2, 193–9. Alternatively, Huffman suggests that for both Empedocles and Philolaus the detachable self may be non-identical with the 'soul'.

Plato's strategy is surely as follows. He accepts that the soul's immortality is a doctrine in which he has been anticipated by the Pythagoreans, but he wants now to make it his own — to appropriate it to his own 'Socratic' heritage. To this end, he takes two students of philosophy who have had every opportunity to acquire understanding about the soul's survival from a Pythagorean teacher, and portrays them as still hopelessly confused on the issue. But where Pythagoreanism has failed, Socrates will largely succeed. At the end of the dialogue one of the pair, Cebes, will be convinced, and the other, Simmias, while still unsure what to believe, will have been set on the right road.

The philosophical lesson is clear. The immortality of the soul is a thesis which, for proof, requires the support of Platonic doctrine, represented in the dialogue by Socrates. Above all, it needs the theory of Forms, on which virtually all the dialogue's arguments in one way or another rely. And, ancillary to this, it is immeasurably strengthened by Socrates' demonstration that all learning is recollection. What it decidedly does *not* need is Pythagorean speculation about the soul's reducibility to a harmony of bodily elements.

We can begin to see what is special about Simmias and Cebes. They are philosophical hybrids, *au fait* with the teachings both of Socrates and of Philolaus. As the dialogue proceeds, we observe what help they get from each philosophy — the Platonic and the Pythagorean — towards understanding of the soul and its destiny. While Pythagoreanism merely confuses them, Platonism enlightens them. By this contrast we are encouraged to think that in one very strong sense the immortality doctrine is more Platonic property than Pythagorean.

V

So far I have talked mainly about what Simmias and Cebes have in common. But they have another, and even less appreciated,¹² significance in the dialogue, and that lies in the difference between them.

To introduce this, I want to focus first on the very important methodological passage on 'misology' or hatred of arguments, at 89d-91c. Socrates tries to explain how some people acquire this condition. He offers the analogy of those who take *people* on trust uncritically: they are likely to be disappointed in them, and may end up losing their faith in human nature altogether, becoming misanthropists. Similarly, those who start out ready to believe any *argument* they hear, without applying sufficient critical skills, are likely to be disappointed when they discover it to be false, and may end up as 'misologists', losing their faith in the power of argument as such. Excessive credulity at the outset leads to excessive incredulity in the end.

Why does Socrates, at this crucial point, address his remarks not to Simmias or Cebes but to Phaedo himself? Because, I submit, he is covertly talking *about* Simmias and Cebes. Simmias and Cebes have both, in the immediately preceding passage, aired strong doubts about Socrates' arguments for immortality. But Simmias' doubts are entirely differently motivated from those of Cebes, and the misology passage enables us to work out how. Cebes' doubts are methodologically correct, and will eventually lead him to a satisfactory resolution. But Simmias' doubts are symptomatic of incipient misology. Let me explain.

From early in the dialogue, Simmias has proved to be the more credulous of the pair. Socrates himself has noticed this difference between them at 63a: 'Cebes is always scrutinising arguments', he says with palpable approval, 'and is not immediately ready to believe what anyone says.' (And Simmias later, at

¹² The only investigation of this that I have seen is E. Grünwald, 'Simmias und Kebes in Platons Phaidon', *Zeitschrift für das Gymnasialwesen*, 64 (1910), 257-63 — a brief but perceptive comparative characterisation.

77a, confirms that this is what his friend Cebes is like: 'He is the most tenacious of people in disbelieving arguments.')

Cebes has just at this point pertinently asked him why a philosopher should be willing to die, if that means leaving the guardianship of the gods. Socrates' response is first to expound his view of the philosophical soul and the intellectual liberation that death will bring it. Only later will he defend the immortality thesis by means of argument. Consequently, for the purposes of his present exposition he needs simply to assume the soul's ability to survive death. Appropriately, it is to Simmias that he puts the following question (64c): 'Do we think that death is something?' 'Certainly,' replies Simmias. 'Do we think that it is anything other than the separation of the soul from the body?' Socrates continues. 'And that this is what dying is — for the body to be separated from the soul, and to have come to be all by itself, *and for the soul to be separated from the body and to be all by itself?*' And Simmias expresses his agreement. Commentators are swift to point out that Socrates was not entitled to any such definition of death, especially as various grounds will later be offered for the fear that on death the soul simply disintegrates. What they fail to notice is that Socrates must have deliberately addressed the question to Simmias because he, unlike Cebes, can be relied on to say 'yes'. It suits Socrates' strategy to defer until later in the dialogue the question whether the soul really can survive death. Significantly, when that worry is raised in due course (at 69e-70b), it will be not Simmias but Cebes who introduces it.

Later, at 84c, when Socrates has accumulated a substantial set of arguments for the soul's immortality, he pointedly encourages Simmias and Cebes to voice further doubts, saying 'Well, do you find anything lacking in what has been said?'¹³ And sure enough, they do both find something lacking. Cebes' doubt is a serious

¹³ μὴν μὴ here is usually rendered as equivalent to μὴν, meaning 'surely not'. But Socrates' next sentence makes it quite clear that he is inviting, not discouraging, their doubts. Hence my preferred translation, as printed. μὴν μὴ in Plato does often seem to expect the answer 'no' (*Sph.* 263a, *Lys.* 208d-e, *Rep.* 505c, *Hp.Ma.* 283d), but at least at *Rep.* 351e its force is neutral in this regard.

and legitimate one, whose seeds Socrates has already subtly sown a little earlier, at 80b, when claiming to have proved that 'the soul must be completely indissoluble, or nearly so.' This has given Cebes his cue to point out that even a soul vastly more durable than the body might wear out and die in the end — an observation which now leads Socrates into his long final set of proofs.

But immediately preceding Cebes' doubt, Simmias has offered some general observations on human fallibility, followed by a specific doubt of his own (85b-86d). He advocates the theory that the soul is a harmony or attunement, which he presents as conflicting with Socrates' arguments for immortality. Socrates, after discoursing on the dangers of misology, turns to Simmias' objection. From his questioning of Simmias, it emerges that Simmias has accepted the harmony theory without strict proof, attracted by the plausibility which has made it such a popular view.¹⁴ We thus see that Simmias' incredulity (about personal survival) goes hand in hand with his excessive *credulity*. Simmias is beginning to resemble Socrates' picture of the misologist.¹⁵

In the light of this, some later developments in the dialogue become more readily intelligible. At 101d, in outlining his method of hypothesis, Socrates advises Cebes on how to deal with someone who 'clings to' a hypothesis which he, Cebes, has chosen: Cebes should make him wait until he has tested the consequences of the hypothesis for mutual consistency. Translators and commentators have usually supposed that this is advice on how to deal with an *objector* to the hypothesis. But the Greek verb for 'cling to', ἔχεσθαι, cannot mean 'attack' or 'object to': on the

¹⁴ This is the context in which Simmias describes it as being held by 'most people', 92d2. He is explaining his own jump onto the bandwagon, and surely not seriously suggesting that it is held by the population at large.

¹⁵ At *Phdr.* 242b Socrates describes Simmias as holding the world record for the number of λόγοι he has generated or forced others to generate. I do not see how this description can be one we are expected to understand on the basis of the *Phaedo* alone, but it is at least compatible with a portrayal of Simmias as constantly producing λόγοι and discarding them with equal speed. (According to Diogenes Laertius 2.124, Simmias published 23 dialogues which fitted into a single volume.)

contrary, it means 'adhere to', even elsewhere in the very same passage.¹⁶ Why, then, should Socrates offer Cebes advice on how to deal with someone who *adheres* to the hypothesis he himself has adopted? The answer must be that the methodology of the *Phaedo* is no longer the confrontational dialectic of the early dialogues. It is now cooperative dialectic. And in cooperative dialectic the main danger is not hasty disagreement, but hasty *agreement*. Socrates' lesson about misology, to be reinforced by the example of Simmias, has served to warn us of this. Never take any person, or any argument, on trust, is the grim message. Believe too much, and you may end up incapable of believing anything.

This message comes fully into focus at the end of the last argument (107a-b). Socrates and Cebes are convinced of the soul's absolute imperishability. Simmias is not so sure. It is not that he sees anything wrong with the argument — he admits that he does not. 'Nevertheless,' he says, 'in view of the size of the subject under discussion, and having a low regard for human weakness, I'm bound to retain some doubt in my mind about what's been said.'

I cannot imagine that Plato did not consider the very last argument with which he credited Socrates to be a cogent one, especially as it is the foundation for Socrates' optimistic acceptance of his own death; if so, Simmias' residual doubts are not meant to reflect entirely favourably on him as a philosopher. They are surely further signs of his misology — the legacy of his uncritical attitude to argument in the past. His hasty acceptance of the harmony theory, followed by his equally quick disillusionment with it, exemplifies the incautious approach to argument which has now left him unconvinced even where conviction would have been justified.

When Socrates calmly drinks the hemlock, everybody else weeps. They are weeping, no doubt, mainly for their own loss, but readers may be left doubting whether anybody but Socrates

¹⁶ For valuable comment on the terminology of this passage, especially the sense of ἐχέσθαι here, see D. L. Blank, 'Socrates' instructions to Cebes: *Phaedo* 101d-e', *Hermes*, 114 (1986), 146-63.

himself has fully appreciated the force of his argument for the positive desirability of death.¹⁷ And looking back to the conclusion of the last argument, we can see why. Socrates responds to Simmias' open admission of his doubts in positive terms, by encouraging not only him, but also everybody else present, to go back to what he calls the 'initial hypotheses' and to scrutinise them once again.¹⁸ These 'hypotheses' are clearly those of the existence of Forms (as is made explicit at 100b), and the dialogue has given us reason to believe that, however appealing a set of hypotheses the theory of Forms may be, it is still no more than that, hypothetical, to everyone except Socrates himself. The others have not yet adequately tested and confirmed it for themselves, in the way recommended by Socrates at 101. Some have made further progress than others, however, and we have seen in particular that the methodologically sound Cebes has progressed further than the over-credulous, and hence mildly misological, Simmias. But there is still hope for them all.

In presenting Simmias as methodologically misguided, I have gone against a view common among interpreters, according to which his professed methodology is virtually identical with Socrates' own. This view is based on the methodological manifesto at 85c-d, with which Simmias prefaces his appeal to the harmony theory:

My opinion about matters like this one may well be the same as yours, Socrates: that to have clear knowledge in this life is either impossible or very difficult, but that not to test in every way what is said about them, without giving up until one has finished examining them from every angle, is a mark of great weakness. I think one should achieve one of two things with regard to them: either to learn or find out how they are, or, if that is impossible, to take at any rate the best and least refutable of human accounts, and riding on it as on a raft to take one's chances and navigate

¹⁷ At 115b-116a and 116d-117a there is a strong indication that Crito, at least, has not. For Plato's disapproval of mourning, cf. *Rep.* III 387c-388e.

¹⁸ I am attracted by the suggestion, made to me by Angela Hobbs, that the extension of this advice to the entire group represents a philosophical agenda which Socrates is leaving Plato and others to pursue.

one's way through life — if, that is, one were unable to make the voyage more safely and with less risk on a more secure vessel, or on a divine account.

This is often compared to Socrates' own chosen method, sketched at 100a-101e, of taking the strongest available hypothesis and philosophising in accordance with it. And it is certainly right to make the comparison: Plato is inviting us to do just that when Simmias suggests, in his opening words, that his method may be the same as Socrates' own. But I cannot believe that Plato wants us to conclude that the two methodologies, at least as interpreted and applied, are one and the same. Why not? Because at the end of the last argument (107a-b), when Socrates is fully convinced but Simmias is not, it is partly their respective methodologies that divide them. Remember Simmias' words: '... in view of the size of the subject under discussion, and having a low regard for human weakness, I'm bound to retain some doubt in my mind about what's been said.' This lack of faith in argument, I have maintained, is a result of uncritical attitudes in the past — excessive trust, followed by disappointment. But it also, significantly, echoes his methodological manifesto — the part of it in which he concedes that in the absence of a 'divine account' one may have to forsake certainty and make do with 'the best and least refutable of human accounts'. Putting these clues together, we can see that Simmias' record of misplaced trust and subsequent disappointment has led him to lower his sights, and to expect no more than probability to emerge from philosophical discourse. His methodological manifesto retains a formal hope of somehow achieving certain knowledge, but, crucially, it allows him to settle for less. And that is why he does, when all the arguing is over, settle for less than certainty.

There is a further, and even more subtle, way in which Simmias' methodological unsoundness arises from his indiscriminating approach to others' philosophical ideas.¹⁹ What makes his manifesto not fully Socratic is the fact that it awkwardly combines

¹⁹ I owe the point made in this paragraph to Myles Burnyeat.

the methodologies of both his teachers, Socrates and Philolaus. From Socrates comes the insistence on 'testing' (ἐλέγχειν) everything one hears. But what about Simmias' preferred alternative of gaining access to a 'divine account'? For Socrates that was no alternative at all: even a divine account, like the Delphic oracle's assertion that no one was wiser than Socrates, had to be 'tested' (*Apology* 21b-c) before it could be believed. The real inspiration for this preference on Simmias' part, a preference which leads him to undervalue human understanding as necessarily insecure, appears to be Philolaus: 'The being of things, which is everlasting, and nature itself admit of divine and not human knowledge . . .' (Philolaus fragment B6 D-K). It is Philolaus, not Socrates, who has taught him to settle for less than certainty.

How could the final gap between probability and certainty be bridged? Socrates says it is to be done by going back and re-examining the 'original hypotheses'. He is alluding to the fact that the theory of Forms itself starts out as a set of hypotheses, albeit one enthusiastically endorsed by all those present. Only Socrates himself has knowledge of the Forms (76b).²⁰ He has a procedure for putting each hypothesised Form on a completely secure footing — one described in barest outline at 101c-e. Whatever that procedure may be — and it is much disputed by commentators — it is certainly one which Socrates' companions in the prison have not themselves applied yet.²¹ If there remains in the reader any doubt that Socrates fully knows and understands the premises from which he argues for the soul's absolute imperishability, while

²⁰ Strictly speaking, knowledge of a simple mathematical Form like 'equal' is shared by all (74a-b), and the knowledge which only Socrates has is of the full range of Forms, including the difficult ones like justice and beauty (see D. Scott, 'Platonic anamnesis revisited', *Classical Quarterly*, 37 (1987), 346-66, pp. 357-8). At 76b it is only Simmias who attributes knowledge of Forms to Socrates, but the closing scene surely confirms that he is right. It is typical of Plato to indicate Socrates' possession of knowledge without putting any such claim into Socrates' own mouth. For instance, in the *Republic* Socrates disclaims knowledge of the Good (506c), yet the prisoner returning to the Cave after discovering the Good is clearly meant to be recognisable to us as another Socrates (517a, d-e).

²¹ Socrates at 100e-102a offers it as a method Cebes *could* use.

for the others they are still hypotheses, these doubts must be dispelled by the death scene. Such is Socrates' grasp on his conclusion that he can remain totally calm in the face of his own death, while all the others break down and weep.

VI

What we have seen in Simmias and Cebes are two carefully differentiated attitudes of doubt. We can end by asking the question why Plato gives this theme so concrete an embodiment in the two principal interlocutors. Why does it receive such close attention? My guess would be as follows.

Plato had from his very earliest work been an explorer of philosophical doubts, presented in the formal guise of the Socratic elenchus. That methodology had been largely confrontational — a way of subverting the theories, value-systems and prejudices of Socrates' interlocutors. In the *Meno* Plato set out to refine his method into a more cooperative notion of dialectic. There he presents the old negative elenchus as just the first stage of cooperative dialectic — a preliminary procedure for removing false beliefs before embarking on a joint search for the truth.²² That was no doubt one way in which Plato could emphasise the continuity between the old Socratic method and his own. He seems almost to be saying: we needed Socrates to show us that we knew nothing, so that we could then proceed to seek out the truth.

In the *Phaedo*, it seems, Plato is trying out a different way of linking Socratic doubt to his own quest for the truth. Doubt is now not prior to discovery, but part of the discovery process itself. Socrates' method of enlightenment, again and again, is to encourage doubts to come out into the open, and then to find the right arguments to quell them. Doubts must not be suppressed, or they will subvert rational belief. They are like a frightened child inside us, who needs to be charmed out of his fears (77d-78a).

²² *Meno* 75c-d.

But properly motivated doubt is a positive asset to the philosopher — one which can provide a powerful lead towards the truth. Wrongly motivated doubt, fostered by uncritical attitudes, can be a handicap, and even threatens to blind us to the truth when we do meet it. We must all try to be less like Simmias and more like Cebes.

APPENDIX

Did Philolaus Teach the Soul-harmony Theory?

Carl Huffman, in his *Philolaus of Croton*,²³ ch. 6, comprehensively reviews the evidence for and against Philolaus' equation of soul with a 'harmony' of bodily elements. He rightly concludes (pp. 326–7) that the secondary evidence is insufficient to support the attribution, but goes on to argue (pp. 328–32) that nevertheless Philolaus almost certainly will have held some such view of soul.²⁴

I welcome Huffman's conclusion, but would myself argue for it on partly different grounds. What may seem to some readers to weaken his case is his procrustean synthesis of a single 'Philolaic' doctrine out of what look like three radically different ones:

- 1 that soul can be expected to be, in accordance with Philolaus' usual metaphysics, a 'harmony' of 'limiters' and 'unlimiteds';
- 2 that soul is located specifically in the heart (his questionable inference from Philolaus fragment B13 D-K, see below); and
- 3 that motes of dust seen in the air either are soul or are moved by it (a view attributed by Aristotle, *De anima* 404a16 to 'some' Pythagoreans).

Combining these, Huffman proposes that 'Philolaus thought of the soul in largely material terms as a group of constantly moving elements in attunement located in the heart' (p. 329).

²³ Cited in note 9 above. This brief appendix cannot do anything like justice to the topic, and Huffman's work should be consulted on all the points raised.

²⁴ For earlier scepticism on this latter point, see e.g. H. B. Gottschalk, 'Soul as harmonia', *Phronesis* 16 (1971), 179–98.

The first point to make is that Philolaus does not necessarily locate soul in the heart. The crucial text is his fragment B13. To avoid unnecessary emendation,²⁵ we should assume that the preceding sentence had referred to four bodily parts each of which 'holds the principle' (ἀρχάν ἔχει) of one vital function, so that this same expression was implicitly carried over. Philolaus continues:

κεφαλὰ μὲν νόου [sc. ἀρχάν ἔχει], καρδία δὲ ψυχᾶς καὶ αἰσθήσιος, ὀμφαλὸς δὲ ῥιζώσιος καὶ ἀναφύσιος τοῦ πρώτου, αἰδοῖον δὲ σπέρματος [καὶ] καταβολᾶς τε καὶ γεννήσιος. ἐγκέφαλος δὲ [sc. ἔχει] τὰν ἀνθρώπου ἀρχάν, καρδία δὲ τὰν ζώου, ὀμφαλὸς δὲ τὰν φυτοῦ, αἰδοῖον δὲ τὰν ξυναπάντων. πάντα γὰρ ἀπὸ σπέρματος καὶ θάλλοντι καὶ βλαστάνοντι.

The head holds the principle of intellect, the heart holds those of soul and perception, the navel of rooting and first growth, and the genitals of the sowing and production of seed. For the brain holds the principle of human being, the heart holds that of animal, the navel that of plant, and the genitals that of all these put together, since it is from seed that everything thrives and grows.

The heart holds the 'principle' of soul, because, as the second sentence explains, it is the heart's function that makes an animal an animal, analogously to the way in which the brain's intellectual function is what makes a human a human. But the heart also holds the closely associated principle of perception, and Philolaus is unlikely to be *confining* perception to the heart, to the exclusion of eyes, ears etc., and indeed of the whole body. So we must take it that the heart's role, its 'holding the principle' of perception, is that of controlling perception throughout the body, not that of serving as its exclusive location. In which case there is absolutely no reason to infer, from the placing in the heart of the 'principle' of soul, that soul itself is exclusively located there.

So far, then, there is no evidence that Philolaus could not

²⁵ See Huffman pp. 316–17 for the emendations which have been proposed. They all seem to me unnecessary, with the probable exception of Boeckh's deletion of καὶ after σπέρματος.

consider soul, while controlled from the heart, to be itself a harmony of all the elements constituting the body. We can add (and here I largely follow Huffman) that there is at the very least a one-in-three chance that soul will indeed turn out to be a harmony, since in Philolaus' metaphysics *everything* is a 'limiter' (περαῖνον), an 'unlimited' (ἄπειρον), or a 'harmony' of limiters and unlimiteds (fragments B1, B6).

Unfortunately we have very little evidence as to which specific items were identified as limiters or unlimiteds by Philolaus. But the theory which attracts Simmias in the *Phaedo* makes soul a harmonious balance of such pairs of bodily elements as hot/cold and wet/dry, and we must ask whether one or more of these pairs is, at least, a plausible candidate for constituting a limiter plus an unlimited. The answer seems to be 'yes'. From testimony A27 of Philolaus (pp. 289–90 in Huffman) it emerges that, according to Philolaus' embryology, the developing foetus consists of hot but no cold. It receives its first portion of cold at the moment of birth, on inhaling the cooling air. This cooling process is described with the verb καταψυχοῦσθαι, 'to cool', which Philolaus almost certainly regards as the etymological root of ψυχή 'soul'.²⁶ This would tend to confirm that it is only with the imposition of cooling breath on the 'hot' body that a creature acquires soul. Even after birth, our bodies are in their own constitution purely 'hot',²⁷ and it is the constant intake of breath that lowers them to their familiar temperature.

On this evidence, a plausible reconstruction of Philolaus' doc-

²⁶ This etymology was later rejected by Plato (*Crat.* 399d–400b), but endorsed by the Stoics and others: see *SVF* 2.804–8; Philo, *Somn.* 1.32; Iamblichus ap. Stob. 1.366.15–16. Support for an etymological interpretation comes later in the same testimony on Philolaus, where — like his contemporary Prodicus (see 84 B4 D–K) — he is said to have paid special attention to the etymology of φλέγμα, again as implying something about temperature.

²⁷ The first sentence of A27 puts it beyond doubt that our *bodies*, even after birth, are constituted out of hot without cold. Philolaus does not, however, say the same about the living *animal*, which we may take to be a combination of body and soul. It is only the κατασκευαζόμενον ζῷον, the 'animal in the process of being constituted', i.e. the foetus, that is called purely 'hot'.

trine of soul would be as follows. Our bodies are in their own constitution purely hot, and the admixture of cold which ensouled life requires must be constantly renewed by breathing. Hot is an 'unlimited', while the cold which is imposed upon it from birth is a 'limiter'.²⁸ It is only in the harmonious combination brought about by breathing that hot and cold make up a living being, and soul *is* that harmonious combination. Soul's 'principle' is located in the heart, perhaps (but here I can only speculate) in the sense that the heart is the command centre for animal functions, including breathing, which in turn maintain the harmonious mixture.

The context of this particular report is the aetiology of disease. Hence the account deals almost exclusively with temperature, which Philolaus regards as basic to human pathology. There is no reason to doubt that in another context he would tell a similar story about, for instance, moistness (cf. Huffman pp. 294–5), with the intake and excretion of fluids likewise crucial to the harmonious balance of wet and dry and hence to the maintenance of soul.

In short, although much of this must remain speculative, there seems to be no obstacle to reconstructing for Philolaus a theory of soul essentially identical to that advocated by Simmias.

How, if so, do we explain the lack of supporting evidence for the attribution? (It is found only once, in Macrobius, *Somn. Scip.* 1.14.19, = Philolaus A23, and, as Huffman rightly observes, Macrobius could himself simply be inferring it from the *Phaedo*.) My guess would be that it was not a prominent or perhaps even a very explicit thesis in Philolaus' writings, so that it was left for Plato to extract it and to realise its significance. That would explain why Aristotle, who undoubtedly uses Philolaus' work as a primary source on Pythagoreanism, nevertheless in *De anima* 1.4 seems to be aware of the soul-harmony theory purely from

²⁸ That it is this way round seems the natural inference to draw from the text. In the very meaning of the terms, 'limiters' should be things which get imposed upon existing 'unlimiteds', rather than vice versa. And in Philolaus' embryology it is cold that at birth gets imposed upon a hitherto purely hot body.

the *Phaedo*, failing to attribute it to 'the Pythagoreans' or indeed to anyone in particular. It is simply 'convincing to many' (407b27–8), a mere reformulation of Simmias' declaration that its plausibility has earned it widespread credence (*Phd.* 92d1–2).

I conclude that the doctrine that the soul is a harmony of opposed pairs of bodily elements is not only intended by Plato to be recognised as one that Simmias has learnt from Philolaus, but is indeed probably drawn from Philolaus' own writings, with their characteristic emphasis on the musical, mathematical and physiological aspects of Pythagoreanism at the expense of the religious and eschatological side of the school's tradition.