Introduction

I argue that Plato’s private opinion of Socrates’ arguments for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo* was the same as most of his readers nowadays, namely that such a belief is a fairytale. Socrates’ arguments for immortality take up 55 of the 60 Stephanus pages of the *Phaedo*. I do not address the specificities of those arguments for this reason. I believe that Plato wrote the *Phaedo* in an eleemosynary spirit, in order to mitigate readers’ dread of their personal extinction at death, by making the most persuasive case he could devise for belief in immortality, an opinion that the author did not share. However differently they are interpreted, all the topics in Socrates’ discussions with Cebees and Simmias that make up the arguments for immortality may be subsumed under the umbrella of that unitary intention. There is no explicit reference in those discussions to sacrificing a rooster to Asclepius. Singling out one or another topic discussed in the arguments for immortality to explain Socrates’ acknowledgment of an unpaid debt for someone’s recent cure from disease as an edifying metaphor of one sort or another produces readings unsupported by the text. Leo

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1 Cf. D. Kamen, "The Manumission of Socrates: A Rereading of Plato’s *Phaedo,*" *Class. Antiquity* 2 (2013), 79: "[. . .]I would argue that there is no reason to assume that someone was literally (original emphasis) healed. In this respect, I agree with scholars who view this as a reference to allegorical or metaphorical healing, though I differ in my explanation as to what has been “healed.”
Strauss' coined term "logographic necessity" refers to the necessity that everything in Plato's Socratic dialogues occurs for a reason, as in well-written short stories. My reading of the last words relies on the fact that the dramatic details in the *Phaedo* are hyper-realistic and serve to drive the argument. For instance, Socrates sitting up after the leg-iron has been struck off and rubbing his ankle, which elicits a disquisition on the relationship of pain to pleasure. In that case, speech immediately follows upon the dramatic detail that evokes it. In the case of the hitherto overlooked dramatic detail that clarifies Socrates' mysterious last words, dramatic detail and speech are not contiguous to one another, but their correspondance is no less fictionally necessary.

1. Socrates argues for immortality (60d10–115b1)

After waiting outside, as they were told to do, the doorkeeper informs Phaedo and the other young friends of Socrates that “the Eleven are releasing him (sc. from a leg-iron), and pronouncing the sentence that on this day he should end his life.” The friends are now let into the prison. Xanthippe, already there when Phaedo and the others enter, is seated, holding Socrates’ youngest son, a baby in arms. When she sees Socrates’ friends, she loses her composure. Crito, a wealthy man, accompanied by a number of attendants, is also there. Socrates bids him have Xanthippe taken home. Socrates’ conversation with the young friends ensues. Socrates argues for the personal survival of the soul in an afterlife. Discussions are spun out over many hours until late in the afternoon.

2. Socrates’ execution and last words (115b1–118a10)
At *Phd.* 115b1, Crito changes the subject. He asks Socrates “What do you instruct them (sc. the young friends of Socrates) or me to do regarding the children or regarding some other thing which, in so doing, we would especially gratify you?” By requesting instructions for himself regarding the children, Crito indicates that he is willing to be their guardian after Socrates dies. Socrates ignores Crito’s request for instructions regarding the children, while tangentially acknowledging their existence, saying “If you (sc. Crito and the young friends) attend to yourselves, you will be serving me and mine, and yourselves as well.” The words τοῖς ἐμοῖς ["my things"] reference Socrates’ possessions which include his children for whom Crito has just requested instructions. The main room of the prison is not the appropriate place to provide instructions to Crito for Socrates’ three sons, in the hearing of Phaedo and the other friends of Socrates who will not be implementing them.

Socrates, accompanied by Crito, now goes off to a side room to bathe. The young friends are ordered to stay behind. Phaedo, in the main room with the others, recounts what happened in the side room by the legerdemain of literary license (*Phd.* 116a7–b5): “and when he had bathed and his children had been brought to him—for he had two little sons and one big one—and the women of the family had come, he talked with them in Crito’s presence,

2 The sequence "them" (sc. the young friends of Socrates), "me," "the children", and "some other thing" exhibits the chiasmus structure ABBA. Crito asks Socrates to instruct him regarding the children; "me" and "the children" constitute the inner pair of the chiasmus. Crito does not know what Socrates would request of the young friends; the outer pair "them" and Socrates' instruction for "some other thing" from "them" frame "me" and "the children."
and gave them such directions as he wished; then he told the women to go away, and he came to us.” Socrates has summoned his household: his three sons and the women of the house. Xanthippe is again present, as why would she not be? Socrates is facing imminent death, he has a family with children, who appear only in the Phaedo. The nurture and education of his sons after he dies must be attended to. Socrates "gave them such instructions as he wished" (ἐπιστείλας ἅττα ἐβούλετο). Crito stands right in front of Socrates (ἐναντίον τοῦ Κρίτωνος), presumably taking note of the specificities of the instructions. Crito’s request for instructions for the children in the main room of the prison, and Socrates providing instructions to Crito in a side room, establishes the fact that Crito is their prospective guardian.

Socrates returns to the main room freshly bathed. The servant of the Eleven arrives. It is not yet nightfall. He has come to announce that the countdown to Socrates’ execution has commenced. Apparently those condemned to die were given the privilege of drinking the hemlock at a moment of their choosing in the time before full sunset. The servant of the Eleven eulogizes Socrates and departs in tears. After reciprocally eulogizing the man to his


4 Cf. J. Burnet, Plato’s “Phaedo” (Oxford,1911), 144: “It is surely impossible to believe with some editors that Xanthippe is not included among the οἰκεῖαι γυναῖκες. The mere fact that the youngest child is brought back seems to show that she is.”
young friends, Socrates turns to Crito and says “Crito, let us be persuaded by the situation (πειθόμεθα αὐτῷ) (sc. that the time is now), and have someone bring the poison!” Crito demurs urging Socrates to delay as long as possible, as many under sentence of death indulge in eating, drinking and even having sex up to the last moment. Socrates again bids Crito be persuaded, replacing the urbane and emollient “Let us be persuaded! with bare injunctives: “Be persuaded and act not otherwise!” (πείθου καὶ μὴ ἄλλως ποίει). The altered syntax and rhetoric reflects Socrates’ sense of urgency, and his impatience with Crito’s delaying tactics. Crito is persuaded, and nods to a slave-boy standing nearby to fetch the man to administer the poison. Summoned, the man with the hemlock arrives. The man hands him the kylix, and Socrates drinks down the poison.

Socrates’ death by hemlock poison is depicted in detail. He is again supine on a couch, as he was when the young friends entered the prison. He uncovers his face to utter his last words and says “Crito, we owe a rooster to Asclepius. Discharge (sc. the debt) and do not fail to attend to it!” (Ὤ Κρίτων, ἐφη, τῷ Ἀσκληπιῷ ὀφείλομεν ἀλεκτρυόνα· ἄλλα ἀπόδοτε καὶ μὴ ἀμελήσητε). In the first clause, who are the we of “we owe” other than Socrates? And for whom is the debt owed? In the second clause, why is Socrates’ injunction to discharge the debt expressed in the plural? As the first clause was prefaced with the address “O Crito,” is Crito the single addressee of the last words, or are there other addressees?

Nothing in surviving ancient texts or archaeological finds of votive dedications and votive effigies in Asclepeions and other centers of healing suggests other than that one sacrifice paid
for the cure of one disease of one person. The outstanding debt of a rooster to Asclepius which Socrates speaks of here would seem to correspond to one individual’s recovery from a bodily disease. That inference is taken for granted without explanation by Nietzsche, Wilamowitz, Nock, Clark, Rouse, Gallop, Most, Calder and Kanayama. On the other hand, Duzémil, Foucault, Santilli, Crooks, Frede, Madison, Balla, Thanassas and

5 A modest householder in Herodas’ *Mime* iv (3rd century BCE) hopes that the temple of Asclepius at Cos will accept her donation of a culled rooster.

6 F. Nietzsche, "Der sterbende Sokrates," *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (Chemnitz, 1882), § 340.


9 P. M. Clark, “A Cock to Asclepius,” *CQ* 2 (1952), 146.


Ricciardone suppose a plurality of individuals cured of a variety of psychic diseases (unhealthy thinking, not caring for one's soul, misology). Wilamowitz, Clark, Rouse, Gallop and Most suppose that one individual other than Socrates has recently been cured of a bodily disease. Nietzsche, Nock and Calder suppose that Socrates himself is the cured individual. Clark, Rouse and Most suppose that Plato is the cured individual. The argument that the debt

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of a rooster to the health-god Asclepius refers to Socrates being cured of the disease of life by
dying is not addressed here.\textsuperscript{24}

Following Clark and Rouse, Most proposes that Socrates, thanks to the gift of clairvoyance
 accorded to the dying, is apprised that Plato, ill with life-threatening disease at daybreak, is
now before nightfall cured and healthy. According to Most, the debtors are many: Socrates,
Crito, the young friends, and future audiences in different time eras of the dialogues that
Plato will write and publish. All owe one rooster to Asclepius, collectively or individually, for
Plato’s cure. Those scenarios do not leave it to the wealthy Plato himself to procure and
sacrifice a rooster to Asclepius now that he has recovered.

Most and others read “we owe” as a\textit{ pluralis societatis} whose antecedents number two or
more unrelated individuals. However, Socrates may be making use of a different kind of
plural. Nietzsche, Nock, and Calder read “we owe” as Socrates saying in effect “I owe.”
Calder terms that usage a\textit{ pluralis modestiae}. Socrates’ remark at \textit{Euthphr}. 12e2–4 is a candidate
instance of a\textit{ pluralis modestiae}. Imagining a conversation with Meletus who is not present,
Socrates says to Euthyphro:

Now try in\textit{ your} turn to teach\textit{ me} what part of justice holiness is, that\textit{ we} may tell Meletus
no longer to practice injustice against\textit{ us} and no longer to indict (\textit{sc. us}) for impiety, since
\textit{we} have now been sufficiently taught by\textit{ you} about what is and what is not pious and
holy.

\textsuperscript{24} For a convincing refutation of that reading, see Most (n. 12), 100–104.
Socrates uses the plural here in attempting to placate an absent Meletus, one of the plaintiffs in a lawsuit against him. A powerless suppliant, Socrates seems to be playfully borrowing the trope of powerful people who make use of the first person plural to signal privilege, in order to represent the opposite condition. Socrates’ usage here may be characterized as an inverted pluralis majestatis, thus reasonably might be called a pluralis modestiae. In the Euthyphro, Socrates’ parody of aristocratic linguistic usage occurs in an imagined conversation with a puissant Meletus. In the Phaedo, there is no such equivalent interlocutor or auditor. Calder identifies “we” as a pluralis modestiae, but does not explain why Socrates would be using it. On the other hand, Calder’s rendering of the pair of plurals in the second clause makes a genuine contribution: “The second person plurals ἀπόδοτε, μὴ ἀμελήσητε refer to Crito and the servant who would cut the rooster’s throat.” That literal and realistic reading solves the seemingly intractable exegetical problem of identifying the antecedents of the final pair of

\[25\] That usage and context also occurs at Men. 99e3–4. Outside of Anytus’ hearing, who became another plaintiff in the lawsuit against him, Socrates tells Meno "we will converse with him (sc. Anytus) another time" (τούτω . . . καὶ αὕθης διαλέξομεθα). The Athenian grandee Critias and the Thessalian aristocrat Meno make use of the pluralis majestatis non-ironically at Chrm. 155a7 and Men. 71c1–2 respectively.
plurals: Crito and one or more members of his household. Calder follows Nock’s suggestion that Socrates “was grateful to the gods for reaching death without infirmity,” and proposes that Socrates “thanks the god of health for a lifetime of good health.” The prevailing morbidity rate of adults in pre-industrial societies would have made life-long good health without infirmity of an individual exceptional. In fact, Socrates refers to his own bouts of disease in reporting that wine tastes sweet when he is healthy, bitter when he is ill (Thet. 159b3–4). Like everyone else in his era, Socrates did not enjoy life-long good health without infirmity. Yet nothing is explicitly said in the Phaedo about Socrates or anyone else having recently recovered from a bout of disease. The question of why he would use the plural to acknowledge a debt for the cure of someone else’s bodily disease in the first clause remains unanswered, and the identity of that beneficiary is yet to be established.

Wilamowitz comments twice on Socrates’ last words. Without explaining his reasoning, Wilamowitz suggests that the rooster is owed to Asclepius for the cure of an unknown member of Socrates’ household. Apparently Wilamowitz parsed the plural verb of the first clause of the last words to represent Socrates speaking as the head of his household, on behalf of his household, in acknowledging a debt which the household collectively owed for the cure of one of its members. That reading seems to dispose parsimoniously of the

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26 The antecedents of the plural verbs of the second clause of the last words are often identified as Crito and Socrates’ young friends. That reading does not explain why Socrates would specifically address the remark to Crito.

27 See note 7.
grammatical puzzle of why Socrates says "we owe."

If Socrates is in fact speaking for his family, ὀφείλομεν ["we owe"] may be termed a pluralis patris familias, grammatically identical to a pluralis societatis. I follow Calder in my reading of the second clause of the last words. Socrates again uses the pluralis patris familias in speaking to Crito as the head of his household—apparently the status required for that of guardian—bidding him have his household act on behalf of Socrates’ household. Crito is to arrange for a communal sacrifice ritual of a rooster,28 which will be effected by means of the collective instrumentality of his household as he directs. Socrates employs the same syntax and rhetoric twice in bidding Crito do something: a pair of injunctives, the second a double negative to reinforce the main injunctive verb. As stated, at Phd. 117a3, Crito is enjoined in the singular29 to be persuaded to act specifically on Socrates’ behalf by having someone bring the hemlock without delay. In the second clause of the last words, a directive is expressed in the same syntax of main injunctive verb paired with a double negative, this time in the plural, requesting that Crito and his household act in aid of Socrates’ household.

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28 Cf. an Attic 5th century BCE red-figure wine pitcher held in the Louvre, imaged at http://www.louvre.fr/oeuvre-notices/oenochoe-attique-figures-rouges/, which depicts a communal sacrifice ritual. What appears to be a dressed, trussed fowl on a spit is held by a naked youth over a fire altar upon which a part of the offering has already been consumed. A man pours a libation from a kylix on the altar. Another man leans on a staff observing the ritual. All are wreathed.

29 Crito himself enjoins Socrates in the exact same words at Cri. 45a3.
The final piece to the puzzle of the last words is determining which member of Socrates' family, for whom a rooster is owed to Asclepius, had recently \(^{30}\) been cured of disease. I nominate the infant who appears briefly at *Phd.* 60a1–3 as the beneficiary of the cure.

Socrates' youngest son, a baby in arms, has been brought to the prison. Its mother, seated, is holding it, presumably so that Socrates, supine on a couch and chained, may see the baby. Had Socrates primarily summoned Xanthippe, the infant would have been left at home with the household women (οικείαι γυναίκες). The household women, whose essential function is to take care of children at home, is a literary contrivance, somewhat ajar with the fact of Socrates' poverty. They serve to relieve Xanthippe of the burden of caring full-time for the infant. Absent the household women, were Xanthippe specifically summoned to the prison, the infant would necessarily accompany her. The fiction of the household women renders the infant's presence in the prison intentional and Xanthippe's role ancillary.

At *Chrm.* 155b4–5, Charmides is said to be suffering from headaches upon arising; Theaetetus succumbed to dysentery and his wounds after the battle of Corinth; Socrates reports that when he is sick, wine tastes bitter to him (*Tht.* 159b3–4); illness is alleged to explain Plato's absence in the *Phaedo*. On the other hand, no one dramatically present in a

\(^{30}\) The fact that the debt had not yet been discharged supports the inference that it had been incurred recently. The two older sons had survived the holocaust of infants under one year in a pre-industrial society. The youngest son, a healthy infant at the present time, would need to recover from life-threatening disease numerous times, were he to celebrate his first birthday.
Platonic dialogue is ever represented as suffering from disease. Socrates’ infant son may be presumed to be healthy. According to Parkin, the IMR (the mortality rate of infants under one year) in antiquity was from 200 to 300 per thousand live births, which is 40 to 60 times that in post-industrial societies (2017 United States non-Hispanic white IMR: 4.9). Analogously, the frequency of morbidity of infants under one year in antiquity would have been between one and two orders of magnitude greater than that of infants in post-industrial societies. Those approximate statistics support the inference that an infant under one year enjoying health in a Platonic fiction is an individual recently cured of life-threatening disease.

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31 Cf. T. Parkin, "Measuring Infant and Early Childhood Mortality," in J. E. Gubbs and T. Parkin (eds.) The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World (Oxford, 2013), 47. Cf. also J. L. Angel, “Paleoecology, Paleodemography and Health,” 167–190, in S. Polgar (ed.) Population, Ecology, and Social Evolution (The Hague, 1975), Table 1. Angel estimates the IMR in 650 BCE to have been as high as 500 per thousand live births!


33 The two older sons had survived the holocaust of infants under one year in a pre-industrial society. The infant son, healthy at the moment, would need to recover from life-threatening disease many times, were he to celebrate his first birthday.

34 Socrates’ concern for his infant son may be assumed to be elicited by a parent’s natural love of his or her own children. That relationship is examined in Socrates’ interrogatory of Lysis in the Lysis. Later in that dialogue, at 219d6–220a1, Socrates recounts the measures
Plato's representation of the dying philosopher's spoken attention to the matter of paying a debt incurred for a currently healthy infant, not yet talking, who would have recently recovered from life-threatening disease by virtue of being under one year of age in a pre-industrial society, and did not die, seems an instance of that author's often favored rhetoric of antithesis. Socrates' last words express his obligations as a head of household regarding his biological family, of personal significance only, in no way a philosophical exhortation to the world. Plato suggestively frames the arguments for immortality with tokens of real life, placing a healthy infant in the prison before the friends of Socrates enter and discussions ensue, and representing a corpse afterwards.

3. Plato's intention in writing the Phaedo

Socrates has offered a panoply of arguments in support of a belief in immortality. For those persuaded by such arguments, their dread of their personal extinction at death is mitigated. Few contemporary readers are persuaded by those arguments, yet it is generally held that Plato believed them on the basis of being the author of the Phaedo. But why would Plato hold a belief for which there is no evidence? In the Apology, Plato has Socrates express the hope (ἐλπίς) that death is a good thing, while conceding that it might be a nullity and that the dead perceive nothing (Ap. 40c5–7).

taken by a distraught father to save the life of his poisoned son.

35 For typical development ages for walking and for talking, cf. https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002010.htm
I propose an alternative explanation of Plato's intention in writing the *Phaedo*, namely that he composed the dialogue in order to actualize the notion expressed in Socrates' remark at *Rep.* 3.414b8–c2:

“How, then,” said I, “might we contrive one of those needful lies of which we were just now speaking, so as by one noble lie to persuade if possible the rulers themselves, but failing that the rest of the city?”

Socrates is proposing here that certain fables, in effect noble lies, be inculcated in the minds of average citizens for their own sake. The authors of such lies do not believe them. A compelling indication of Plato's disbelief in the personal survival of the soul after death is this dramatic detail. Plato inserts into the dialogue a critique of Socrates' arguments for immortality, sited in an inconspicuous, easily overlooked place, confined in Crito's mind. Doing so would be pointless, were Crito not competent to recognize consolations.

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36 Crito's philosophical competence is often deprecated. For example, Most (n. 12) 110 writes "[... ] (sc. Crito) has not the slightest grasp of his (sc. Socrates') philosophy [...]."

Crito's ability to follow the philosophical discussions in the *Euthydemus*, as demonstrated by his comments on Socrates' and Kleinias’ inquiries, suggests otherwise. Plato does not inform readers whether Crito embraced or spurned Socrates’ protreptic in the envoi of the *Euthydemus* urging him to pursue philosophy. However, at the end of his life, in the *Crito*, Socrates recalls that "we (sc. Socrates and Crito) often in past times (sc. engaged in
masquerading as philosophical *logoi*. Hearing Socrates’ arguments for immortality elicits the opinion in Crito’s mind that Socrates is consoling the grieving young friends as well as himself. As Crito cannot express that opinion out of consideration for the present circumstances, Plato has Socrates conveniently read his mind for the audience’s sake: “It seems to me that those things (*sc.* the arguments for immortality) speak otherwise to him (*sc.* Crito), (*sc.* as arguments) consoling you (*sc.* the young friends) and myself as well (*Phd.* 115d4–6).” That Crito’s opinion reproduces Plato’s opinion may be inferred from these considerations. The opinion that arguments for the personal survival of the soul after death are unverifiable⁴⁷ consolations is either true or false. A false opinion about Socrates’ arguments for immortality is useless in evaluating them because it is false. If Crito’s opinion is false, why would Plato single out a figure who plays an ancillary role in the dialogue and impugn his acumen for no apparent reason by placing a false opinion in his mind? On the other hand, if Crito’s opinion is true, namely that the arguments for the personal survival of the soul in an afterlife are unverifiable consolations, then they are so and constitute a noble lie.

collaborative inquiry and) reached agreement on issues” (ὡς πολλάκις ἥμιν καὶ ἐν τῷ ἐμπροσθεν χρόνῳ ὦμολογήθη [Cri. 49a6–7]).

⁴⁷ Consoling, soothing, comforting or encouraging someone—παραμυθούμενος τίνα covers all those meanings—are rhetorics of persuasion, in contrast to *logoi* that may be confirmed or disproved.