THE GRAMMATICAL PUZZLES OF SOCRATES’ LAST WORDS

Introduction

I argue here 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.\(^1\) 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 the audience's 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 Cebe 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\(^2\) produces readings unsupported by the text. Leo Strauss' coined term "logographic necessity" refers to the necessity that every little thing 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, the dramatic detail of Socrates sitting up after the leg-iron has been struck off, and rubbing his ankle, elicits a disquisition on the relationship of pain to pleasure. Leg-iron struck off and Socrates' remark about his feelings marries dramatic detail with speech, the former evoking the latter, the two located continguously in the text,

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\(^1\) Plato’s framing of Socrates’ immortality arguments puts a distance between Socrates’ opinions and those of the author. As tokens of real life, Plato places a healthy infant in the prison before the friends of Socrates enter and discussions ensue, and represents a corpse afterwards.

\(^2\) E.g. 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.”
and easy to parse. Less easy to parse are dramatic details separated from the speeches to which they refer. I will argue that the presence in the prison of Socrates' youngest son, a healthy baby in arms, at 60a2, is the key to the meaning of Socrates' last words at 118a7–8.

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 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 the things of Socrates' household, notably his children. But the main room of the prison is not the appropriate place to provide instructions 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 (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 gave such directions as he wished to Crito; 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 household with wife and children and women servants, who appear only in the *Phaedo*. The nurture and education of his sons after he dies must be attended to. Socrates provides the instructions (ἐπιστείλας ἄτα ἐβούλετο) requested earlier by Crito in the main room. *Crito stands right in front of Socrates* (ἐναντίον τοῦ Κρίτωνος), taking note of the specificities of the instructions. Crito’s request for instructions regarding the children in the main room of the prison, and Socrates summoning his family to the prison to witness the instructions he provides to Crito, establishes the fact that Crito is the prospective guardian of Socrates’ sons.

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 young friends, Socrates turns to Crito and says “Crito, let us be persuaded by the situation (πειθώμεθα 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 πειθώμεθα αὐτῷ with bare injunctives: πείθου καὶ μή ἄλλως ποίει [“Be persuaded and act not otherwise!”]. The altered syntax and rhetoric reflects Socrates’ sense of urgency, and his impatience with Crito’s

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3 Translations of the text are mine. I follow the text of J. Burnet, *Platonis Opera* (Oxford 1901-06).

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 οἰκείαι γυναῖκες. The mere fact that the youngest child is brought back seems to show that she is.”
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, ἔφη, τῷ Ἀσκληπιῷ ὀφείλομεν ἀλεξτρονά· ἀλλὰ ἀπόδοτε καὶ
μὴ ἀμελήσῃτε). 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. Socrates acknowledging the outstanding debt of a
rooster to the health-god Asclepius⁵ would seem to refer to one individual’s recovery from a
bodily disease. That inference is taken for granted without explanation by Nietzsche,⁶
Wilamowitz,⁷ Nock,⁸ Clark,⁹ Rouse,¹⁰ Gallop,¹¹ Most,¹² Calder¹³ and Kanayama.¹⁴ On the other

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.

⁷ U. v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Platon: sein Leben und seine Werke² (Berlin,1959), 135, n. 1; Platon:
Beilagen und Textkritik² (Berlin, 1962), 58.

⁸ A. D. Nock, review in CP 45 (1950), 45–50, of E. J. Edelstein. and L. Edelstein, Asclepius: A
Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies (Baltimore, 1945).

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


hand, Duzémil, Foucault, Santilli, Crooks, Frede, Madison, Balla, and Thanassas suppose that the antecedents of the plural verbs are unrelated individuals each cured of one or more of a variety of psychic diseases (unhealthy thinking, not caring for one's soul, misology) thus each owing one rooster to Apuleius. Opinions differ whether Socrates, like the other antecedents of his first person plural verbs, has also been cured of unhealthy thinking, not caring for his soul or 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 of a rooster to the health-god Asclepius refers to Socrates being cured of the disease of life by dying is not addressed here.

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

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19 D. Frede, Platons “Phaidon.” Der Traum von der Unsterblichkeit der Seele (Darmstadt, 1999), 171.


23 For a convincing refutation of that reading, cf. Most (n. 12), 100–104.
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. That complicated scenario, which renders the author of the *Phaedo* vain-glorious in self praise, does not leave it to the wealthy Plato to procure and sacrifice a rooster to Asclepius now that he has recovered.

Calder proposes that “we owe” is a *pluralis modestiae*, but does not explain that construction or why Socrates would be making use of it. On the other hand, his reading 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 plurals, namely 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’s bodily disease in the first clause remains unanswered, and the identity of that beneficiary is yet to be established.

Most and others read “we owe” as a *pluralis societatis* whose antecedents number two or more unrelated individuals. Wilamowitz proposes that the rooster is owed to Asclepius for the cure of a member of Socrates’ household. Apparently Wilamowitz read the plural verb of

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24 The antecedents of Last Word’s plural verbs are often identified as Crito and Socrates’ young friends. That reading does not explain why Socrates would specifically address the remark to Crito.
the first clause of the Last Words to be representing Socrates speaking as the head of his household, on behalf of his household. The hypothesis that the debtors are members of a single household solves the problem of how a plurality of individuals might have individually incurred the debt for one person cured of life-threatening disease and why Socrates uses the first person plural. Wilamowitz’s reading provides a parsimonious explanation of how those elements of Socrates’ last words might fit together.

If Socrates is in fact speaking for his family, ὀφείλομεν 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, 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. At 117a3, Crito is enjoined in the singular 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, Socrates uses the second person plural in addressing Crito as householder to householder, expressed in the same syntax of main injunctive verb paired with a double negative, bidding Crito have his household conduct a ritual sacrifice of a rooster to Asclepius in aid of Socrates’ household.

The final piece to the grammatical puzzles of Socrates’ last words is to determine which member of Socrates’ family, for whom a rooster is owed to Asclepius, had recently been

25 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.

26 Crito himself enjoins Socrates in the same words at Cri. 45a3.

27 As the debt for it has not yet been paid, the recovery from disease would have taken place
cured of disease. I nominate the infant who appears briefly at 60a1–3 as the beneficiary of the cure. Socrates' youngest son, a baby in arms, has been carried 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 oikeiai γυναῖκες [women of the household]. The household women, whose essential function is to take care of children at home, is Plato's invention, somewhat inconsistent with Socrates' notorious poverty. They serve to relieve Xanthippe of the burden of caring full-time for an infant. Absent the household women, were Xanthippe specifically summoned to the prison, the infant having no other attendant would necessarily be carried there by his mother. The fiction of the household women renders the infant's presence in the prison intentional and Xanthippe's role ancillary.

Socrates intended to behold his youngest son, a baby in arms, one last time and ordered that it be brought to the prison. Was the philosopher Socrates so loving and sentimental a father? Socrates mentions the innate love of parents for their children in the Lysis at 207d6. Later in that dialogue, he recounts, at Lys. 219d5–e4, how a distraught father sought an antidote to save the life of his son who had ingested poison. In the Phaedo, an antidote apparently had been found for Socrates' baby son who, as will be seen, had recently recovered from life-threatening disease.

Plato often refers to disease. 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

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28 Cf. D. Nails, "The trial and death of Socrates," in A Companion to Socrates (Oxford 2006), 5: "his net worth, including his house, was 5 minae (Xenophon, Oeconomicus 2.3.4–5), the equivalent of what a sophist might charge for a single course (Apology 20b9), and less than a skilled laborer could earn in a year and a half."

29 The baby in arms was again present in the throng at the prison later when Socrates' household witnessed his instructions to Crito, for all of its attendants had been summoned.
dramatically present in a 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. Unlike readers nowadays, Plato’s original audience would have known that reality first hand. Those approximate statistics establish the fact that a healthy infant under one year in a Platonic fiction is an individual recently recovered from life-threatening disease.

That fact and Socrates’ use of the pluralis patris familias makes the meaning of the last words perfectly clear: the debt for the infant’s recent recovery from disease has been incurred by Socrates’ household and not yet discharged. The last words themselves constitute an incomplete antithesis requiring readers to supply what is omitted. That rhetorical device is termed an enthymeme. These enthymematic inferences complete the antithesis. The dying Socrates, the man of λόγοι [speeches], acknowledges and orders discharged a debt incurred by his household for the recovery from life-threatening disease of his baby son, who is not yet talking and did not die.

3. Plato’s intention in writing the Phaedo

30 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, estimates the IMR in 650 BCE to have been as high as 500 per thousand live births!


32 Cf. Arist. Rhet. 1409b32 et seq.

33 For typical development ages for walking and for talking, cf. https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002010.htm
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 in the personal survival of the soul in an afterlife 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).

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. In the case of the *Phaedo*, an auditor's dread of her personal extinction at death is mitigated by being persuaded that the soul survives death in an afterlife. The authors of such fables do not themselves believe in them. A compelling indication of Plato's disbelief in the immortality of the soul 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 competent34 to recognize consolations masquerading as

34 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
philosophical λόγοι. 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 (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 unverifiable35 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 by placing an inconsequential thought in his mind? On the other hand, if Crito’s opinion is true, that the arguments are a fraud, then they are so and constitute a noble lie.

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past times (sc. engaged in collaborative inquiry and) reached agreement on issues” (ὡς πολλάκις ἡμίν καὶ ἐν τῷ ἐμπροσθεν χρόνῳ ὑμολογήθη [Cri. 49a6–7]).

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