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## Philosophy and Death;

## Philosophy as Divertissement

*Continuing to learn from the Phaedo and Pascal*

By William Eaton

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The setting of the *Phaedo*, the dialogue of the soul in the shadow of imminent death, is precisely the setting that reveals most clearly the nature of the activity of philosophy: *philosophy always is done in the presence of death.*

— Ann Hartle, *Death and the Disinterested Spectator*

I do not ask for mercy for understanding for peace  
And in these heavy days I do not ask for release  
I do not ask that suffering shall cease.

I do not ask for anything I do not speak  
I do not question and I do not seek  
I used to in the day when I was weak.

Now I am strong and lapped in sorrow

—Stevie Smith, lines from “I Do Not Speak”<sup>1</sup>

This paper is structured as a series of riffs that keep coming back to a central text (Plato’s *Phaedo*), to Pascal’s observations regarding *divertissements* (diversions, or serious play, we might rather call it), and to a central question: “If we cannot attain the knowledge we seek and do not much want the knowledge we have, and if knowledge in any case cannot save us, what are we doing pursuing it?”<sup>2</sup> This is for present purposes a question regarding philosophical endeavors (be they of professional philosophers or of many another thoughtful soul), while also being a question about how the human mind copes with the human predicament.

We may come to take Socrates’s final answer to be these words from near the end of the *Phaedo* (115D): “It seems I have said all this . . . in vain in an attempt to reassure you and myself too”. This is an iconoclastic essay.

This is also an interdisciplinary essay, for interdisciplinary people. It will not presume the level of familiarity with the *Phaedo* and other texts that an article for Plato scholars would presume, and the essay will mix the insights of philosophers with those of psychologists,

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, p. 57. Previous quotation from Hartle, p. 71. See also the *Phaedo* itself, p. 81A: “For is not philosophy the study of death.” *Note*: This quotation happens to come from R. Hackforth’s well-known translation for Cambridge University Press, but I have worked with several translations of the *Phaedo* (and of other dialogues) and will move between them, and also not balk at combining and then editing what seem to me the better aspects of different translations of the same segment.

<sup>2</sup> In Stanley Cavell’s writing on skepticism in *The Claim of Reason* and *Disowning Knowledge*, I have found the matter framed this way: The question is not, say, what is the good or is there a good, or is it knowable, etc., but why do we pose such questions—and why do we have answers, however poor they may be?

The phrase “serious play” comes from Press, *Plato*, p. 123. In section (9) the phrase is quoted in context. I would like to thank Professor Press of the City University of New York and Professor Dmitri Nikulin of the New School for deepening my understanding of Plato from two rich perspectives. I also thank Dmitri for the insights and questions raised by our several conversations on conversation. I thank two interdisciplinary friends, Stuart Johnson and Walter Cummins, for their comments on an earlier draft of this piece. This is not to lay blame on any these people for the present text.

sociologists and poets, while also dipping into the muddy waters of personal experience. Embracing Montaigne's approach to the *essai*, I will not shy from juxtaposing disparate elements nor from quoting at length rich passages from other writers. And, in some Montaignebakhtinian spirit, the present essay will not present the conclusions of a thought process that has been wrapped up, but rather the unwrapping of thoughts in what is presumed to be a potentially infinite process which, at its best, could encourage others to do their own unwrapping.<sup>3</sup> The end can only be exhaustion, but hopefully with some thought-provocation and diversion having been found in the exercise.

## (1)

In the *Phaedo* Plato shows Socrates choosing to spend the last hours of his life exploring with two out-of-towners some proofs for the immortality of the soul, and what is ultimately most engaging about these proofs has to do with the fact that they come up short. Either Socrates himself reveals their shortcomings or Plato gives his readers sufficient means and a sufficiently questioning attitude to recognize shortcomings themselves. It is not surprising that Socrates comes up short; he—or Plato for him—has chosen an impossible task.<sup>4</sup> In the *Apology* Socrates himself asks his fellow Athenians, “What does it mean to fear death, if not

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<sup>3</sup> As regards Bakhtin, cf. “From Notes Made in 1970-71” in *Speech Genres*. For example, from p. 146: “[T]here can neither be a first nor a last meaning; it always exists among other meanings as a link in the chain of meaning, which in its totality is the only thing that can be real.” And, p. 140: “We are suffocating in the captivity of narrow and homogeneous interpretations.”

<sup>4</sup> I note the value *for the reader* of the impossibility—or of Socrates's audacity. The admiration, hope and courage we feel in reading the *Phaedo* comes not only from the fact that Socrates is talking dispassionately about death on the day of his death and is sticking to his intellectual principles even as he is about to be killed at least in part because of them. There is also the fact that, with death clearly in sight, Socrates takes up proving the immortality of the soul as if it gaining knowledge of this subject were just a matter of applying one's mind to it. Insofar as a human being can, with a straight face, take up such a task—or, say, try to know how the world began, or try to love another as him or her self—and if he or she can connect with the human desire to believe that such things, all things, are possible, it may seem, momentarily at least, as if even the sky itself has no limit and death indeed has no sting.

to imagine that one has knowledge of something about which one is in fact entirely ignorant?”<sup>5</sup>

Given this barrier, and noting that knowledge of the afterlife is not likely to emerge from a few hours conversation, . . . Why not spend his last hours with his wife and sons, or getting drunk, having sex, running for his life? No, Socrates says, “Maybe it’s specially fitting that someone about to make the journey to the next world should inquire and speculate as to what we imagine that journey to be like; after all, what else should one do during the time till sundown?”<sup>6</sup> The “what else” (in translation) is the heart of the question, encouraging us to wonder if the choice is simply arbitrary.

In several dialogues and particularly through the character of Crito, Plato makes plenty of room for us to wonder if and feel that, in fact, the choice was not arbitrary, and that, in not acting to save his own life, Socrates made a mistake, a grave mistake, as we say. In the *Crito* (45C-D) for example, Crito says that Socrates, in refusing his friends’ offers to assist him in escaping his death sentence, is committing an injustice to his sons and ignoring his parental responsibility to do all he could to raise them well.

This is a view, a feeling that I, as a son and as a father of a boy, share. But, instead of coming down on Socrates for the moment at least, let us recognize that this is a question we adults frequently ask ourselves: What else should I be doing? Helping the poor? Coaching my son’s baseball team? Putting my papers in order or doing more scuba diving? Apologizing to Anne and Carol, Cindy, Kirk and that boy who was on the trip to Russia with me back in high school? Plato’s Socrates, Kant and many another have presented this is *the*

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<sup>5</sup> *Apology*, 29A-B (my translation from Luc Brisson’s translation into French); see also 37B.

<sup>6</sup> *Phaedo*, 61E. The “what else” appears in many translations.

question of philosophy: What should a human being do—in general, at seemingly crucial moments, at any moment?

On one level Socrates has his answer: The good, the thing to do, is to examine what the good is, and this even knowing that you will come up short. The paradox here is clear: We cannot know what the good is, but we know what it is: It is to try to know what the good is, even though we cannot. And if we are searching doggedly for what we already possess, then the process is either absurd or disingenuous, and since the good lies in the process (rather than its product), the good must have something to do with absurdity or disingenuity.<sup>7</sup>

Insofar as we cannot know what we should do, and thus also cannot know if we have happened to do what we should, in choosing what to do before this one, or any one, seemingly consequential moment—the moment of our deaths . . . It is as if—recognizing a difference between red and black and between different integers, but without knowing if these differences are significant or if it is better to win or lose, or if winning and losing are a part of the game—we choose a number at roulette. To put this another way, every human task has its impossible aspect. Underneath each task lies the hope that it might be the right task, or (taking out the garbage, playing tennis) that it might be a subset of the right task: the task that will either render irrelevant our mortality (we're having so much fun), or, better, help win for us the immortality of soul if not body that we must achieve, but which cannot be achieved, or at least not by the mortal beings we are in the here and now.

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<sup>7</sup> With Pascal in mind, we could consider Socrates's approach in the *Phaedo* as a, or the, precursor for Pascal's famous wager regarding the existence of God. From the *Phaedo*, 91B: "The way I look at it . . . is this: If what I maintain is indeed true, then it is well that I have come to believe it; if on the other hand there is no future for the dead [i.e., no immortality for the soul], then at least during this time before my death I'll distress everyone here less with lamentations, and this foolish belief of mine will not persist—which would have been a pity—but will very soon be over and done with." See also 114D.

(2)

Of course there are plenty to respond—what is all this about mortality, impossibility, ignorance?” We have plenty of religions and preachers of other stripes reassuring us there is no end.<sup>8</sup> In working on this essay it has occurred to me that there are likely also scientists, and optimistic non-scientists, who not only believe that science will one day figure out how human bodies can live forever; science will also—through sophisticated brain scans and neurological experiments—be able to describe accurately the experience of death. (So we might be able to make an informed choice: death or immortality?)

As for the limits of human understanding, there are plenty who would argue that my premise is wrong—i.e., we can achieve knowledge and not just of the fact of our deaths. Against this I note again that in the *Phaedo* Socrates focuses on human beings’, or the human soul’s, experience of death. In this case, though hardly only in this case, the word “death” serves as a placeholder for the unknown. It appears to name something, but what? “The undiscover’d country from whose bourn no traveller returns”?

We might imagine that Plato took up the subject of death in the *Phaedo* precisely because of this aspect of it: because death reminds us—and reminded him—of the insufficiency of human knowledge. In both senses of the phrase. On the one hand our knowledge is insufficient because we cannot know what will be the experience of death. When we talk about death in anything but the most primitive, materialistic sense, we reify a falsehood—that death is a knowable phenomenon (notwithstanding that we may never

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<sup>8</sup> *Cf.*, for example, the apostle Paul, “[I]n the twinkling of an eye . . . the dead shall be raised incorruptible” (1 Corinthians, 15:52); or the pop song “Secret O’ Life,” by James Taylor, in which the problem of mortality is reduced with the observation, “Now the thing about time is that time isn’t really real”; or the U.S. presidential candidate John McCain’s conclusion to his concession speech, to his ostensible admission that his campaign was dead: “I call on all Americans, . . . to not despair of our present difficulties, . . . because nothing is inevitable here” (from transcript of concession speech, Phoenix, Arizona, November 4, 2008; as reproduced by CNN on <http://edition.cnn.com>; accessed February 2009).

know it). On the other hand, our knowledge is insufficient because, no matter how much we accumulate, it cannot make us immortal. Neither knowledge nor the pursuit of knowledge could save Socrates either from the *polis* or from himself; nor can it save us.

“Death” is the quintessential example of the illusoriness of our life in language, but it is far from the only example. As Platonic dialogue after Platonic dialogue suggests (and this more than two thousand years before Wittgenstein), the harder we try to know what we mean with the words we use, with words we use thinking they invoke our most basic values—courage, *sophrosyne* (moderation), *arête* (excellence, virtue), the good—the more we realize, or feel, that knowledge is beyond us. And the more we give ourselves over to the pursuit.

As regards our knowledge of death, William James observed in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,

The fact that we *can* die, that we *can* be ill at all, is what perplexes us; the fact that we now for a moment live and are well is irrelevant to that perplexity. We need a life not correlated with death, a health not liable to illness, a kind of good that will not perish, a good in fact that flies beyond the Goods of nature. (137)

We are looking for a solution to a problem so insoluble it is absurd to call it a problem.

Plato comes up with a devilish way of dramatizing this. The character Socrates places his hope in perplexity (in Greek, *aporia*), for what may come to us when we are at wit’s end, absolutely frustrated and perplexed as a result of a search for knowledge, when we no longer even know what we want to say.<sup>9</sup> For example, in the *Alcibiades I* (for all it may have been written by a friend or admirer of Plato’s rather than by Plato himself), the future warmongering oligarch Alcibiades exclaims: “By all the gods, Socrates, I no longer know

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<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Gestalt therapy places hope in a “stuck point”, in Zen may be found “great doubt”, in Karl Jaspers *Grenzsituation*, and so forth. The matter may also be viewed the other way round: It is rare that human beings, absent *aporia*—without being overwhelmed not only by their ignorance but also by its seeming significance—will make an effort to look beneath the surface of their putative knowledge, or know-how. *Cf.*, the *Meno*, 84C.

what I want to say” (127D-E).<sup>10</sup> Whereupon Socrates responds that the real work of learning can now begin, and—if the gods are willing—succeed. But in fact this method does not succeed either with Alcibiades nor does it with the many other future tyrants and sophists the Platonic Socrates engages in conversation in the dialogues.<sup>11</sup>

And meanwhile, at key moments in several of the dialogues Plato shows Socrates falling back on literature or blind faith, myth or dreams. Socrates invokes his daemon or *daemonion ti*, his “divine something”—his private, privileged source of supernatural knowledge and guidance.<sup>12</sup> This retreat from knowledge, or the search for knowledge, to faith and tradition, is how Socrates gets out from under the *aporia* with which he habitually infects his conversations and interlocutors.<sup>13</sup>

At the opening of *L'Innommable* (*The Unnameable*) Beckett digs into the predicament in which we human beings find ourselves and parodies a philosophic approach, with a humor that I imagine both Plato and Socrates would have appreciated.

What to do, what am I going to do, what should I do, given my current situation, how to proceed? By pure *aporia* or rather by assertions and counter-assertions invalidated as I go, or sooner or later. . . . There must be other approaches. Otherwise there would be no hope. But there is no hope. By the

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<sup>10</sup> To no longer know what to say is one thing, but to no longer know what one wants to say implies a deeper level of self-doubt, or of self-emptiness, resourcelessness, *aporia*.

<sup>11</sup> See Press, 137: “Socrates takes steps to help the interlocutor recover from the frustration and return to the inquiry. To the extent that he is successful in this, the dialogue will end well for the interlocutor because he will have become aware of ignorance, the first step on the road to knowledge, and because he will have learned that some answers are wrong, that certain premises seem to be worth accepting, and he will have practised the skills needed to eventually attain knowledge. In fact, this rarely or never happens.” (My underscoring.)

<sup>12</sup> *Daemonion ti: Apology*, 31D. As regards Socrates’ daemon, see also *Apology*, 33C and *Phaedrus*, 242B; for dreams: *Crito*, 44A and *Phaedo*, 60E. Note, too, that the Greek word we translate as “happiness”—*eudaimonia*—literally means having a good daemon.

<sup>13</sup> *Cf.*, the *Meno*, 80C-D: “It isn’t that knowing the answers myself, I perplex other people. The truth is rather that I infect them also with the perplexity I feel myself.”

Of course, as with any god, guru, professor or essay writer, it turns out that the wisdom of Socrates’ daemon is at the mercy of the person who hears and interprets her or him. In the *Phaedo* (60E-61A), Socrates reports that he had been repeatedly visited by a dream-figure who always says the same words, “Socrates, be diligent and make music.” For most of his life, he interprets this as obligating him to do exactly what he is doing and wants to do: philosophy. Then, in prison, he feels he should make poetry. “But why, Socrates,” it would have been fun to ask, “why given this call to make music, why did you never, say, take up the lyre?”

way, before going any further, forging ahead, I should say that I am using the word *aporia* without knowing what it means.<sup>14</sup>

(3)

Perhaps there is yet another way in which this essay goes wrong, gets confused: In focusing on Socrates (to say nothing of *aporia*). Socrates is unusual, if not perverse, in that he is eager to pursue knowledge notwithstanding that for him this may be at the price of his life, or of his body's life. For example, in the *Crito* (46A and 46D) the title character makes an eleventh-hour appeal that Socrates let him help him escape the death sentence. "Let's talk, or rather let's not," Crito says. "This is not the time to talk, a decision should already have been made. . . . If we wait any longer, escape will be impossible, there will be nothing more to do."

Socrates replies, "As for me, in any case, I would very much like, Crito, to examine with you if, given my current situation, this argument [that some political decisions should be respected and others not] applies or not."<sup>15</sup>

We might say that Socrates is determined to talk himself to death. And this because he believes that the practice of philosophy through conversation is the best training for dying and the best way to cope with one's fear of death.<sup>16</sup> But for most of the rest of us, behind our pursuits of knowledge—or of information—lies the belief that any little bit of information could be the one that helps us or our offspring survive longer. We are eager to learn which vitamin to take, how to defend ourselves against terrorists and *E. coli*, how to

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<sup>14</sup> Beckett, here in my translation; pages 7-8 in the French original.

<sup>15</sup> This is my gloss prepared from Luc Brisson's translation into French. The underscoring is mine as well, to stress that Socrates is as attached to the social aspect of intellectual conversation as he is to the subjects that might be discussed.

<sup>16</sup> See the *Phaedo*, 67E.

avoid being hit by lightning. What are we doing pursuing knowledge? Whether we know it or not, we are often engaged in trying to stave off death, to buy some more time.

I am thinking now not only of philosophers, but also of scientists, journalists, stock analysts—and also of 1-year-olds in their baby carriages, their eyes searching everything that flashes, everything that moves, everything with eyes. Although this, the unabashed curiosity of the very young, may be the most beautiful sight in the world, and though we may not find the least hint of fear in these infants' eyes and but rarely in the products of philosophers, scientists, journalists and stock analysts—do we not believe that curiosity and fear go hand in hand?<sup>17</sup> We look, we examine because we feel the resulting information may prove necessary to our survival. Think of deer standing immobile in a field, their big eyes wide open, ears at the alert, nostrils flared, taking all in with such seeming calm and with such readiness to bound away in response to the slightest provocation. No more than a fawn can a baby know which pieces of information will prove essential, and thus s/he avidly takes all in.

So here is an answer for us: In the long run all the “knowledge”—or, better, all the information—that even the wisest or most determined human being might discover or recollect will prove insufficient, but at any given moment even the slightest piece may prove life-saving, and thus our avidity for knowledge. Thus is it less than absurd, is it plain wrong to ask why we are engaged in the pursuit of knowledge—and of death first and foremost?

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<sup>17</sup> This is an oversimplification justifiable only by the ostensible focus of the present essay and the spectre of disintegration that surrounds it. In addition to the place of fear in the curiosity of both infants and older humans, we should also reserve a place for what we might call the desire, or need, to connect with others. When we look we are not only on the lookout for enemies and other dangers, but also for lovers, friends, people to help us and for us to help. We look to try to know others, not only because their otherness is threatening but also because it is attractive (and perhaps also simply puzzling)—and because we are social animals, dependent on others for survival and security. I suppose the attractiveness of others might be traced back to our once hardly other mothers and their wonderful breasts, but this analytical perspective does not make otherness any less wonderful.

It also happens that if there is anything we do know it is that we are going to die, and yet, as Socrates shows, if, ostensibly pursuing knowledge, we take up a piece of this problem and think hard enough about it, . . . As if by magic, the fact of death, the centrality of death in our lives, to the very idea of life, . . . It all seems somehow more distant, less pressing, less tragic.

I found being there [at the prison, with Socrates in his final hours] an astonishing experience. Although I was witnessing the death of one who was my friend, I had no feeling of pity, for the man appeared happy both in manner and words and he died nobly and without fear.<sup>18</sup>

“One of the main points in my ethical code,” Descartes wrote, “is to love life without fearing death.” Which is to say that one of the paramount features of his life was, as with the rest of us, fear of death; and as Socrates in *elenchus*, so Descartes in ethics (as well as in mathematics, optics, . . . ) found a way of distancing himself from this fear.<sup>19</sup> When a soldier, worker, etc., complains about the difficulties of his life, give him nothing to do, Pascal proposes.<sup>20</sup> Which is to suggest a yet more audacious, impossible “task” for Socrates’s last hours: just sit in his cell, without people to talk to. We have our conversations, our friends, our shoulds, wants, hobbies and habits to protect us from the thoughts and feelings to which we would be prey without them.

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<sup>18</sup> Phaedo speaking in the *Phaedo*, 58D-E.

<sup>19</sup> Descartes, p. 131, as quoted in Schneewind, *Autonomy*, p. 184. See also Descartes, pp. 215-16 [Schneewind, p. 190, n. 33] where Descartes writes that he has found knowledge of the soul to be the best way to prevent himself from fearing his own death. We might say that from this perspective a complete ethical code would have two main points: denying/escaping fear of death and denying/escaping the difficulties involved in being a social animal, in trying to cooperate with other human beings. This is also to note the extent to which modern ethics is an attempt to deny our “is” with any number of “oughts.”

<sup>20</sup> *Pensée* 394. See also 529 on “ennui”. “Nothing is as unbearable for a human being as to be completely at ease, without passions, involvements, diversions, cares. He then feels his nothingness, his abandonment, his insufficiency, his dependence, his impotence, his emptiness. . . .”

Note that different editions and translations of the *Pensées* group and number them differently. I am following the system used by Michel Le Guern in editing Pascal’s notes for Gallimard in 1977.

It also happens that all this activity stands in the way of our appreciating our predicament, or even simpler aspects of our circumstances, and our shoulds and our questioning and our bits of information often confuse us, delaying action or misdirecting it. Often the young leap naively into life-saving actions that the wisest, best-read, most-experienced cannot arrive at. At the present pass of human history we keep coming up with new sophisticated technology and social systems to address seemingly dire problems—e.g., global warming, the proliferation of nuclear weapons technology—resulting from our sophisticated technology and social systems. If history can be our guide, our new know-how (and our mistaking it for knowledge) must soon enough be the source of our seemingly most serious problems.

We humans cannot stop wrestling with mortality, even though our efforts—to include this essay—must come up short. I recall hearing of an old man who, suffering from an incurable, debilitating disease, asked his son to kill him by first sedating him and then asphyxiating him with a pillow. When the dutiful son put the pillow over his infirm father's face, his father began to resist, and with a strength that overwhelmed any will his son had to do as he had been asked. It is in our sinews to fight death with every ultimately useless tool we have—fists, swords and dialectical conversation included.

#### (4)

And so, *how* then, does dialectical conversation—or conversation more generally, be it face-to-face or via texts—how does conversation help us in our fight? (And how may we get hurt fighting in this manner?) Most of this essay focuses on philosophy as a specific, particular endeavor, but in the present section I want to put on the table and ruminate about two more general answers to my questions—two diversions, or coping strategies, that professional

philosophers share with verbal human beings more generally. What are we doing pursuing unattainable knowledge? What was Socrates doing, among other things, trying to prove the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*?

A. *We are using our words.*

The phrase “use your words” is itself used by modern-day parents and teachers as advice to young children who are upset. (That is, an assumption is that upset is something we do not want to be, and indeed should not be, and this notwithstanding the fact that even the luckiest of lives offers some very good reasons to get quite upset.)

Children are urged to use words because in the process of converting powerful feelings into words, the feelings can be “mastered”; that is, the words rather than the feelings may come, at least temporarily, to dominate a child’s or an adult’s consciousness and behavior. The words and the processes needed to articulate the feelings elbow the feelings aside.<sup>21</sup>

Heading back toward philosophy, an interesting feature of this process is that it can take a good deal of intellectual work to convert our feelings to words—in Platonic terminology, to give a good account (*logos*) of our state of mind. And the more we engage in this work, and the more ambitiously we engage in it—trying to be as true to our feelings and thoughts as possible—the more our feelings become attenuated. And this notwithstanding whether we succeed in giving a good account or not—*it’s the trying that counts*. Moreover, both because of the greater calm thereby achieved and because of the sense of mastering something at least, instead of upsetting feelings we may enjoy feelings of confidence, pride. A sense of mastery calms both children and adults.

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<sup>21</sup> Hartle (71): “Argument requires the control of the very passion that gives rise to it.”

This is both a wonderful, saving process, and a source of self-deception, as, along with overestimating our mastery, we can quickly forget that there were, and are, powerful, disturbing feelings. Indeed, *le processus nous fait perdre insensiblement*, the process leads us astray without our realizing it.<sup>22</sup> We can even come to believe we are on the road to the truth rather than reacting to it, distancing ourselves from it. We can come to believe that *sophrosyne* (in the sense of self-control), calmness, *ataraxia* (untroubledness), a stoic attitude— These can come to seem not ways of coping but a sign that we have ascended to some higher realm, closer to Apollo, the sun, the truth.<sup>23</sup> It is the rare individual who on rare occasions can simultaneously hold in his or her consciousness the idea that all our answers—to include “all is one”, “there is no answer”, and so forth—cannot be answers, along with the idea that *for this reason* it takes an almost inhuman effort to stop our minds from generating such non-answers.

Along with the *Phaedo* and Pascal’s *Pensées*, a core text for the present essay is *The Importance of Disappointment*, a book on a psychotherapeutic approach to life, we might say; a book written by the British sociologist and psychotherapist Ian Craib when one of the cancers that soon enough killed him was in remission. Among many other things, from his experience as a psychotherapist, Craib observes that talking about something can be a way of *not* experiencing it.<sup>24</sup> He identifies a common fantasy of people who come to psychotherapy claiming to be seeking some kind of cure: As long as they talk about their problems, their internal life will remain orderly and predictable, and they will not need to make any

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<sup>22</sup> Pascal, pensée 393; see section (8) for larger extract.

<sup>23</sup> *Ataraxia* was the goal of early skeptics. By noting that conflicting accounts could be given of phenomena, Sextus Empiricus claimed, skeptics “come first to suspension of judgment and afterwards to *ataraxia*”. (untroubledness, tranquility). [*Outlines of Scepticism*, pp. 4-5.] In *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Cornell U P, 1966), Helen North reviews the evolution of the use of the word *sophrosyne* in ancient Greece.

<sup>24</sup> And so, I’m afraid we must say, writing books about disappointment or essays touching on the fear of death may be ways of trying not to experience them.

changes.<sup>25</sup> This, we might say, is to take the idea of a “talking cure” one step further—to where the talk itself is the “cure,” or the reassurance that helps people stay their particular courses, however healthy or unhealthy they may be.

I must note, however, that our subject is death. From this perspective, and from the perspective of the cancer-stricken Craib himself, we must ask: What sort of changes, besides immortality, might either Craib or his patients have had in mind.

B. *We are finding strength in the social nature of language*

In any case, or meanwhile, another wonderful thing about words is that they are implicitly social. They take the upset child or adult out of the solipsism of his, or her, powerful feelings into a world of other beings who, he has learned to presume, use words much as he does and can understand him.<sup>26</sup> (And our use of language turns this presumption into reality as we are taught, and at times forced, to embrace the understandings given to us by language, and to each of us as users of particular languages.)

When I was an adolescent some of my hipper friends liked to quote a line from a British art-rock band: “Truth is words and words are talk.”<sup>27</sup> This was taken to be a put-down, truth is nothing but talk. But, particularly for those of us who believe the truth is *at best* an unattainable goal, it is not the truth that saves, or comforts, it is the talk, be it in the

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<sup>25</sup> Craib, pp. 162 and 110.

<sup>26</sup> In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein famously called attention to the security, and insecurity, we find in our life in language. He was addressing what I will call epistemological security. The focus of the present segment, however, is on the emotional security of having—as Socrates had in his last hours and, apparently, throughout his life—people to talk to and of talking, in a bounded way, with them. [In the *Investigations*, as regards security see §241; as regards insecurity, see for example §142.]

<sup>27</sup> The Bonzo Dog Band, I believe.

way Craib observed, or by giving us a sense of community, of shared experience, of solidarity.<sup>28</sup>

In a chapter on “sociability,” the sociologist Georg Simmel proposed that talk in its purest and most sublimated form “wants to be nothing but relation.”<sup>29</sup>

As soon as [a] discussion becomes objective, as soon as it makes the ascertainment of truth its *purpose* . . . , it ceases to be sociable and thus becomes untrue to its own nature—as much as if it degenerated into a serious quarrel. (52)

When we bring this perspective to the *Phaedo* and to much of philosophic and reflective endeavor more generally, we find, however, that there is a way to talk, and to write, with truth as the ostensible purpose, but with solidarity and *divertissement* thanks to the company of others as more significant goals. With the help of the *Phaedo*, I believe we can appreciate how, *contra* Simmel, the comfort we find in conversation has less to do with any contentlessness, and more to do with there being boundaries to the conversation—most specifically, with there being things that are not going to be said, ways we are not going to speak (or write), language that will not be used.

These boundaries tend to go unrecognized except when they are breached. They involve tacit agreements. It can even be tacitly agreed that we will disagree, we will argue, but

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<sup>28</sup> *Cf.*, Camus’ *La peste*, in which the central characters join together in conversation and various care-taking activities, risking their lives to fight the plague, not because they know how to fight it or if it is worth fighting (or if it is even a significant event), but for the solidarity they find in the struggle—and for the pleasure they find in this solidarity. See also, Richard Rorty, e.g., from *Consequences of Pragmatism*: “In the end, pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hopes of getting things right.”

A problem here, which Dmitri Nikulin works through in “Richard Rorty, Cynic: Philosophy in the Conversation of Humankind”, is that Rorty, while ostensibly giving up on “right” has not given up on “what matters”—i.e., on solidarity being what is right. One might think similarly about *La peste*. In both cases solidarity takes the place of truth or knowledge, but once there can no more than truth or knowledge support the weight of being “what matters,” or of being in fact the truth, what is right. One might write a history of philosophy tracing how as we identify weak links in our chains of reasoning we either rename these links or shift our hopes to other links, and then it may take several generations before we realize that the weakness remains, only with another name. Of course the present work is not, and cannot be, exempted from this dynamic.

<sup>29</sup> Simmel, p. 53.

even here I think the comfort comes from there being an agreement and particularly from the agreement involving restrictions—circumcisions, if you will. We will argue but not raise our voices or engage in personal attack, or challenge the self-assessments, the self-images of the parties to the conversation. We will try to embrace the principle of charity and offer a requisite amount of positive feedback, casting any criticisms in terms of things we like or indeed *as* things we like.<sup>30</sup> We will reserve our criticisms for people, or for the ideas of people, who are not party to the discussion.<sup>31</sup> We won't argue or talk about sex in front of the children. We won't talk about politics. We won't ask Dad if that's really coffee in his morning mug, or tell him, or Mom, that we wish they had not split up. We won't talk about the fact that we have entered into an agreement not to speak of many things, or to speak in certain ways and not in others.<sup>32</sup> We won't talk about death. Or, in the case of the *Phaedo*, we will talk about death in the abstract, but not about the fact that one of the parties to this conversation—one of the human beings—is going to die in a few hours and the others soon

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<sup>30</sup> I have in mind American conversation; the tacit agreements governing conversations in other cultures will be different, but be constraining all the same. Similarly, I am aware that in American self-help books and the like a distinction is often drawn between the way in which women and men talk with one another, an assumption being that the former are more open, less constrained in their conversations. Among other things, men seem to take cover in limited subjects with specialized vocabularies: talking only about sports, or cars, business, . . . philosophy. I wonder if the difference here is not more apparent than real; there are certainly constraints at work in both cases.

<sup>31</sup> I am struck, eavesdropping, by how many conversations feature a scapegoat: a colleague, neighbor, putative friend, or a political party, nation or other group that is not represented at the table at which the conversation is taking place. It seems the solidarity of conversation depends on their being an other or others who are not like "us"—or who are deliberately misunderstood as not being like us. *Cf.*, Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 61: "It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness."

<sup>32</sup> Left out here are particular features of contemporary life: The television that is always on in rooms where people (typically families) are ostensibly trying to communicate with one another; the cellphone that is answered in the middle of an ostensibly intimate conversation, or the cellphones that simply sit on the table between the interlocutors as if to remind them, reassure them, that they are not fully present but are, rather, dispersed in some electronic network, ever available to not quite communicate with someone else. These devices, too, can be viewed as ways of constraining our conversations and thus of allowing them to be particularly about constraint.

enough.<sup>33</sup> In being constrained in what we can say, in constraining ourselves, we feel part of a social unit and feel the comfort of that community (be it a dyad, a family, a nation, an academic discipline).

Before concluding this section, two remarks about this aspect of conversation. First, as regards Socrates, it may be noted that in many of Plato's dialogues—in the *Meno*, the *Charmides*, the *Apology*, . . .—the solidarity of conversation is at best honored in the breach. By one analysis, by Plato's Socrates's own analysis, the crime that got Socrates killed involved violating a sense of solidarity and this *through* conversation, by showing the citizens of Athens that they were ignorant, that they could not even satisfactorily explain what their most basic values were—they did not even know, if you will, who their gods were.<sup>34</sup> Given this, it is interesting that in the *Phaedo*, with death staring him in the face, the aspect of solidarity in Socrates's approach is more in evidence.<sup>35</sup>

In all of the Socratic dialogues there is the feeling that Socrates does not want to and indeed could not go it alone; he is depending on his interlocutors to be willing to explore with him, to play with him, let's call it. But often this willingness leads to the interlocutors being overwhelmed by questions and argument and reduced to *aporia*, while Socrates holds himself apart—ever the questioner, rarely the questioned. But in the *Phaedo*, there is more of a sense that, even though they are not intellectual equals, Socrates, Simmias and Cebes are

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<sup>33</sup> This is not such a rarefied example as it might seem. We could think of countless examples of when something quite specific was preying on our minds or hearts and rather than talking about it directly we either talked abstractly—e.g., about love or friendship or time—or talked about other people and other people's experiences rather than our own.

<sup>34</sup> We might imagine a modernday Socrates circulating in restaurants interrupting the conversant to ask unwanted questions: e.g., "Are you sure this is what you think, what you are feeling?" Having read Freud, Melanie Klein and others, he might go on: "Do you believe it possible to know what you are thinking or feeling?" More prosaically, I find myself at times wishing someone would ask questions like: "What is it to you that this Sarah is disliked by her colleagues or doesn't like children?"

<sup>35</sup> It is also interesting to note that most philosophic conversation, texts included, does not share with Socrates this Parrhesic or Cynical style. Exceptions come to mind—Nietzsche, pages in Foucault and Derrida—but by and large my sense is that solidarity, a spirit of collective enterprise prevails.

working together on the question of the immortality of the soul, and they are working together to use philosophic conversation to calm their fears of death; to use their words to avoid lamentation, tears and other “unseemliness”.<sup>36</sup>

Secondly, I would note that these diverting and circumcising aspects of conversation, for all they do comfort us, . . . I suspect that often it is a colder comfort than we like to admit. Subconsciously and in moments of clarity, we must feel how much we and our interlocutors are not saying, and *that* we are not saying, there is an emptiness to our words. Alfred Adler noted that we human beings are forced to compensate for our weakness by forming alliances and cooperating, and this activity, *far from relieving us of our feelings of deprivation and insecurity, embodies them*.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the unsaid in our conversations, while bringing us together and distancing us from our fears, must also make us edgy, reinforce a feeling of insecurity.

Perhaps my life will be sufficiently long for me to explore conversation and its discontents more completely in another work. For the moment, trying to wrap up this section, I would just note that there is another quite different kind of conversation, or aspect of conversation, or brief moment in some of our conversations—a confessional aspect, we might call it. I recall a Jean-Luc Godard movie in which a character named Eve Democracy was interviewed in a vernal glade by a representative of the mass media. Among the questions: Do you think orgasm is the only moment in which you can’t cheat life?<sup>38</sup> In a not dissimilar spirit I would ask

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<sup>36</sup> See the Phaedo, 91B and 117D.

<sup>37</sup> Adler, *Menschenkenntnis* (Hirzel, 1927), pp. 20-22, a segment translated in the collection of Adler’s work, *Individual Psychology*, p. 129. A translation of *Menschenkenntnis* was earlier published in the United States under the title *Understanding Human Nature* (Greenberg, 1927).

<sup>38</sup> “Sympathy for the Devil”, originally titled “One Plus One”. All of Eve’s answers were limited to “yes” or “no”. I do not remember which she answered to this particular question. I trust it is understood that it did not matter.

if it is at those moments when we are confessing to an other or to others our fears, our suffering, our joys—are these the moments at which we are least diverted and come closest to touching the knowledge that philosophers seek?

In one of his essays, the psychoanalyst (and composer) Emmanuel Ghent writes about human beings’ “intense longing to surrender in the sense of giving over, yielding the defensive superstructure, being known, found, penetrated, recognized.”<sup>39</sup> As regards conversation, what I am suggesting is that also at rare confessional moments—and of course I could not be talking about cheap, superficial, insincere confessions, but about confessions that reach toward what is involved in being a human being, . . . At such moments, we approach this feeling of surrender and the knowledge it may contain.<sup>40</sup>

Notwithstanding brief moments in the *Phaedo* such as when Socrates caresses Phaedo’s hair or says “I am in danger at the moment of not having a philosophical attitude,” I do not believe that as a rule Plato’s Socrates achieves this level of conversation either in the *Phaedo* or elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> Among other things, he invariably grabs the masculine role—penetrator rather than penetrated—and leaves the surrender of and to *aporia*, to his interlocutors. (And, giving speculation free rein again, I would ask if this imbalance intensified Socrates’s desire to finally surrender—to the Athenian *polis*? the hemlock? Thanatos?)

An example I often use is of a brunch I participated in, a brunch in a neighborhood restaurant, after a kids’ soccer game. Most of the kids were at one end of the table, and I was with four or five adults at the other end. As is my wont I

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<sup>39</sup> Ghent, p. 118.

<sup>40</sup> I am tempted to say that all such confessions are variations on “life is hard,” but I would like to leave room for some quite different confession, about joy. Perhaps the primary phrase here is “I love you”?

<sup>41</sup> The hair (89A-B); the phrase (91A).

found myself edging toward confession, making a kind of remark that is rarely made at such occasions—or which perhaps is not so rarely made, but is rarely fully acknowledged, is rarely taken up and taken further. I said that in my personal experience the love parents feel for their children can play havoc with the love they might feel for one another. A father of two of the boys sitting at the end of the table added, “And you know what’s worse: When both parents fall in love with the same child.”

That I would say was the whole conversation, or the whole moment in which a long brunch swirling with solidarity, gossip, laughter, diversion and constraint became something richer. Some sort of *daemon* blessed our table—and then quickly departed.

(5)

Before this essay itself disappears into mysticism and speculations that have not had time to mature, let us return to the central question of this paper—what are we doing . . . ? And let us note that it is not on the surface a philosophical one but a psychological question, about behavior and motivation. I am, however, among those who believe that philosophy, though it rarely concerns itself with psychology, is nonetheless a psychological response—an emotional response—to the human predicament. And this response is couched in a particular rhetoric—the rhetoric of philosophy, logic included—which has the advantage/disadvantage of disguising the emotional source of the response from embracers of the rhetoric.

Hartle writes (71) as regards the *Phaedo*, “The fear of death allows the question of the nature of the soul to come out of obscurity.” It is equally true that the discussion of the nature of the soul pushes the fear of death into obscurity.

The *Phaedo* is the most emotional of Plato’s dialogues, and as steeped in irony as the others. But in my experience both of these qualities are ignored as students of the dialogue work through the logic of his arguments and embrace Socrates as the first and greatest intellectual hero and find in his words and behavior guidance—ways of grappling with the human predicament (e.g., through assuming a separation of body and soul, by practicing philosophy, by adopting the Stoic attitude Socrates adopts *avant la lettre*). Is this limited study of the text a product of a system of higher education which, in the wake of Plato’s founding of the Academy, has existed in no small part to provide professors a priestly or guild-like status? Thus their teaching cannot focus on such things as the possibility that our most basic questions are unanswerable or that the pursuit of knowledge is also a running away from what we know too well? And there would seem to be another status issue mixed up in here: Going back to Plato, though not Homer, the suppression of emotion has been considered a mark of social superiority, both as regards social classes and as regards the sexes. And thus we can scarcely recognize the significance of emotion to such superior beings as Socrates and Plato?<sup>42</sup> Or—a third possibility—to what extent is it simply that we human beings have a tremendous need for guidance and a concomitant desire not to have to recognize either the depth of this need or its unfulfillability?

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<sup>42</sup> And thus we find also how my present reading of the *Phaedo* comes along. In recent decades a new attitude has arisen at least among liberal professionals. It is now thought that the more men are able to admit to emotions and to explore them with therapists, friends and romantic partners. (Craib noted in 1994 that vulnerability and fear seemed “in” for men, and anger for women.) This is not to say that we are to act on our emotions, or that we are to really express all of them (male crying is good, male trembling with fear or raising fists, very bad). In fact, the idea is, rather, that by admitting to our emotions and talking about them, we will be more able not to be ruled by them. (See the discussion of “The Management of Emotions” in Craib, pp. 86-92.)

Nonetheless, if we really wish to do philosophy on the highest or most elemental level, if we wish to get back to first questions, then it would seem worth trying to root out the emotional questions that lie behind our philosophizing and accept them as legitimate—as unshameful, if you will. Psychologists speak of “owning” one’s feelings, and I also have in mind an idea of “holding” or of “sitting with” feelings, of trying to resist as long as possible the ultimately irresistible urge to respond—the urge to respond as a way of dismissing, belittling or distancing oneself from one’s feelings.<sup>43</sup> To invert a famous line of Spinoza’s, to understand we need to be able to laugh and not be ashamed of our laughing, to lament and not be ashamed of our lamenting, to curse and not be ashamed of our cursing.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “It is a matter of being able to hold—experience—difficult feelings without being driven into finding some way of getting rid of them, by projection, denial, action or whatever.” Craib, p. 55. I would call particular attention to the word “action”—to include the building of philosophical systems.

In the conclusion of *The Importance of Disappointment* (p. 193), Craib takes this idea of holding one step further: “If I put a hand in the fire and it is burnt, I will not do it again in a hurry; psychotherapy says, in one sense, put your hand in the fire and keep it there. Psychological development depends on ‘staying’ in the fire, to the point where we begin to understand the pain and find that it is bearable, and that it might even be used in some way.”

I would argue that Socrates rejects this approach when he rejects the way out Athenians offer him: exile, and giving up his relentless questioning and teaching. In the *Apology* (37E-38A; “the life unexamined is not worth living”) and the *Crito* (50-54: “Do not value either your children or your life or anything else more than goodness”) Socrates recognizes that to accept these offers would be to renounce his principles—however erroneous or self-serving they might be—and thus be another kind of death, the death of his particular self and of his principles. But, I am proposing, it would also to be to stay in the fire of life as a social animal, inevitably dependent on and at war with a community of others.

<sup>44</sup> Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* I §4: “Non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere.” Not to laugh, not to lament, not to curse, but to understand. In context: “I have tried sedulously not to laugh at the acts of man, nor to lament them, nor to detest them, but to understand them.” See also: *Ethica*, Book III, *Praefatio*.

In *The Gay Science*, §333, Nietzsche went after this line: “[W]hat else is this *intelligere* than the form in which we come to feel the other three at once? . . . Before knowledge is possible, each of these instincts must first have presented its one-sided view of the thing or event; after this comes the fight of these one-sided views, and occasionally this results in a mean, one grows calm, one finds all three sides right, and there is a kind of justice and a contract; for by virtue of justice and a contract all these instincts can maintain their existence and assert their rights against each other. Since only the last scenes of reconciliation and the final accounting at the end of this long process rise to our consciousness, we suppose that *intelligere* must be something conciliatory, just and good—something that stands essentially opposed to the instincts, while it is actually nothing but a *certain behavior of the instincts toward one another*.” (Italics in the original.)

It might be said that Nietzsche’s goal was to put *intelligere*, understanding, or rational thinking more generally, in its place. From this perspective, my goal is different: to put laughing, lamenting and cursing in their place—that is, to elevate their status.

(6)

Thus, again, what is now framed as a psycho-philosophical question: If we cannot attain the knowledge we seek and do not much want the knowledge we have, and if knowledge in any case cannot save us, what are we doing pursuing it?

In the next three sections I am going to offer three answers. The first will be mildly confessional, and I hope will also help remind readers and this text of this dark sun (death) that we are trying to avoid looking at directly. The second two answers will bring us back to Socrates. One will be from a purely psychological perspective; the other will summarize the answer the philosopher Ann Hartle provides in pages on the *Phaedo* in *Death and the Disinterested Spectator*.

Before I wade into my “confession”, a remark of Nietzsche’s:

Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary, unconscious memoir. . . . In the [great] philosopher . . . there is nothing whatever that is impersonal.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, we might say, Nietzsche never felt the need to follow in Rousseau’s footsteps and engage in more conscious memoir writing. Nonetheless, I am tempted to ask whether, taking a large view, philosophy is not only an interpretation of philosophers’ life experiences and feelings but also a misrepresentation of those experiences and feelings more generally? Or to put this another way, where is the virtue of confessing without admitting that one is confessing? What is the virtue of detailing thoughts which, we might say, are shadows of thoughts and feelings that one is, with more or less effort, keeping unconscious? Decorum?

These questions notwithstanding, I—respectful and appreciative of the various protections that academic writing offers—will not here launch into an exploration of the

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<sup>45</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §6. In the several sentences between the two quoted here, Nietzsche adds, *inter alia*: “I do not believe that a ‘drive to knowledge’ is the father of philosophy; but rather that another drive has . . . employed understanding (and misunderstanding) as a mere instrument.”

feelings and experiences that have been dogging me during the year or so that, off and on, I have worked on this essay.<sup>46</sup> I will say, however, that a certain personal experience, along with various signs of male aging—thinning hair and expanding prostate; attractive young women who have either ceased to see me or smile as at a grandfather—have finally gotten it into my head that, for an individual, life does not repeat.

This loss of interest, hair, and enterprise —  
Ah, if the game were poker, yes,  
You might discard them, draw a full house!  
But it's chess.<sup>47</sup>

This is a British poem; often in American allusions to life as a game, winning is neither impossible nor a matter of chance, but rather the result of playing well—and this in turn as a result of *learning* to play well, of developing know-how, if not knowledge. We come down hard on people we call “losers,” thus trying to blind ourselves to the fact that, at least in one particular, and seemingly most important, game, we’re all losers.

And for most of us our own mortality is only a part of the story. For parents of young children, Socrates included, or for those who may be leaving behind relatives who cannot care for themselves, or people or animals who are loved as if joined with oneself—the horror and psychological pain of death as leaving others behind may command our

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<sup>46</sup> It should also be noted that this idea of confession has become rather complex since Freud. In Rousseau’s day and likely also in Nietzsche’s, a good confession required—or, we might say, required only—commitment, courage, honesty, shamelessness, perhaps more than average intelligence. But now we live in a world in which especially the most talented and courageous analysts come to realize that they cannot be sure what their feelings and thoughts are. That is, on the one hand, they cannot be sure if the feelings and thoughts they have finally arrived at after much soul-searching are in fact the “right” ones, the ones that they really feel and think; and, on the other hand, they cannot be sure if these feelings and thoughts are indeed theirs, as opposed, say, to the feelings and thoughts of others—parents, teachers, police—which they have internalized and continue to internalize, only imagining these feelings and thoughts to be their own. At an extreme, we might say that in Freudian and post-Freudian reflections the self has simultaneously been subjected to an unprecedented level of scrutiny and become almost as unknowable as death. We may be persisting in using “self” as a placeholder for a wish, or as an awkward way of referring to the coexistence of disparate phenomena that all happen to influence our behavior. (I explore this issue at greater length in my current book project; working title, *On Human Ignorance*).

<sup>47</sup> Larkin (94), lines from “Continuing to Live”.

attention more than any of our own physical afflictions, any medical tortures or fears of the unknown. My own father and mother are getting up in years. Respectful of the tax code, my mother has taken out an annuity which involves a large bet with an insurance company as to how many more years she has to go, her bet being less than ten more years. At times I find myself wondering what the deathbed scenes will be like, the saying good-bye (if it should come to that). Are these wonderings and even my fear of leaving my young son on his own—are they too *divertissements*? Ways of skirting the fact/problem of my own mortality, as Socrates skirts his own in exploring arguments for the immortality of the soul?

(7)

As regards Socrates's deathbed behavior, before turning to a more philosophical explanation, I am going to present an iconoclastic one, and this in an odd way, through the lens of late twentieth-century British psychotherapists writing not about the *Phaedo* but about contemporary approaches to death and other losses and unwanted problems. I would stress that—above all in contrast to Socrates's approach in the *Phaedo*—my approach here cannot be called noble. You might say I am, by contrast, stressing the ignoble aspect of death. In any case, our subject is not nobility, a concept involved in social hierarchies and their justification.<sup>48</sup>

I begin with an observation of Craib's: In the late twentieth century writers on psychology and human beings more generally got "caught in the denial of negative experience" and struggled "to transform [the] painful experience of loss into a creative

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<sup>48</sup> I have in mind a line from the *Phaedo*, 114D: "No sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief—for the risk is a noble one—that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places". I.e., the souls of those who have led an "extremely pious life" and have "purified themselves sufficiently by philosophy" are freed after death from their earthly prison and "make their way to even more beautiful dwelling places" (114B-C).

experience, as if the loss could [thereby] be shrugged off.” Thus, our question here is: Might this be one way of characterizing what Socrates is doing in the *Phaedo*?<sup>49</sup>

Anna Witham, a British social scientist and psychotherapist cited by Craib, apparently observed that in the late twentieth century we developed an idea of a “good death”—comparatively peaceful, friends and relatives involved, goodbyes said, business finished, conflicts resolved, the dying person prepared and ready to go. I.e., in the late twentieth century we once again embraced something akin to the model provided by the *Phaedo*. In “The Idealisation of Dying,” Witham argued that this approach to death is one side of a splitting process in which the other side—the real horror, pain and mess of death—is denied.<sup>50</sup>

In *The Importance of Disappointment* Craib proposes that it is hard to imagine

a life which, if honestly experienced, does not involve regrets, unfinished business, unresolved conflicts, loose ends, hatred and bitterness. . . . Death is likely to be extremely painful, extremely messy and full of conflict. Dignity is lost, while life remains. And I am only talking about deaths which are expected. The last dying person I saw had choked on her supper, and when I visited her in the hospital, the functions of the primitive brain stem were the only ones working. . . .

The fear with which we avoid death reminds us of how awful death is—the final, unrepenting and incurable disappointment that we want to avoid. (16)

Is Plato’s Socrates in his final hours trying to have his cake and eat it too? Via an ostensibly death-defying pursuit of knowledge is he trying to deny the awful knowledge that is staring him in the face? And thus his intellectual project is corrupt—while also heart-rending, all too human?

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<sup>49</sup> Craib, pp. 7 and 12.

<sup>50</sup> Text here is from Craib, p. 15, citing A. Witham, “The Idealisation of Dying,” *Free Associations* 3: 80-91; and R. Kastenbaum, “Dying Is Healthy and Death a Bureaucrat: Our Fantasy Machine Is Alive and Well,” in M. Dimatteo and H. Friedman, eds., *Interpersonal Personal Issues in Health Care* (Academic Press, 1982).

A premise of Freudian and post-Freudian psychotherapy is that a great deal of psychic energy can be put to more productive, enjoyable use if a subject can be freed from the task of defending his or her consciousness against unpleasant information. For example, there is the energy that the abused devote to defending themselves, their self-images and their abusers from the truth of the abuse. One might read the sequence of the *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo* in this way: as a victim's desperate attempt to preserve ideals in face of reality and to not recognize his victimization. (Mortality might be thought of as the ultimate abuser, but in the case of Socrates, the mason's son, we can also ask if he recognized the extent to which he was a fall guy for his friends the oligarchs, who had led Athens to defeat.) The character in the *Phaedo* who, from this perspective, would seem to have to come to a more mature acceptance of the human predicament is Cebes: "I do not deny that many things do trouble me."<sup>51</sup>

And what would then be heart-rending is that Socrates' attempt to preserve his ideals and self-image in the face of harsh reality comes at the price of his life. As with people who commit suicide (be it because of psychic or physical pain), we might say that for Socrates it was easier to drink poison than to accept what life was trying to tell him. Of course this is not the way Socrates puts it. As discussed previously, in the *Apology* (37D-38A) and the *Crito*, as in the *Phaedo*, Socrates values the pursuit of knowledge over the life of the body, raising his sons, friends' feelings.

I close this "answer" to our question with three quotations: one from the British child psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's exploration of the idea of false vs. true selves, one from the conclusion of Craib's book on the importance of disappointment, and the final one from the *Apology*.

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<sup>51</sup> *Phaedo*, 103C. I also note Appollodorus who apparently cries throughout the discussion.

When a False Self becomes organized in an individual who has a high intellectual potential there is a very strong tendency for the mind to become the location of the False Self, and in this case there develops a dissociation between intellectual activity and psychosomatic existence. (In the healthy individual, it must be assumed, the mind is not something for the individual to exploit in an escape from psychosomatic being. . . .)

When there has taken place this double abnormality, (i) the False Self organized to hide the True Self, and (ii) an attempt on the part of the individual to solve the personal problem by the use of a fine intellect, a clinical picture results which is peculiar in that it very easily deceives.<sup>52</sup>

Let us recall yet again that our subject, as Socrates's in the *Phaedo*, is death, and this particular "personal problem" has one very striking feature: It admits of no solution. We have a choice of: deception/denial/avoidance, on the one hand; or, on the other, acceptance of a phenomenon which it would be inhuman to accept.

We are caught between the Scylla of denial and the Charybdis of suffering. Or, as Craib puts it:

The movement towards external and internal reality makes life both easier and harder; energy involved, in this example, in denial is released . . . and can be put to other, more productive purposes. The price is experiencing a real and appropriate fear; perhaps . . . learning how to suffer.<sup>53</sup>

And so, we might say, Socrates, having consciously or subconsciously considered the alternatives, tells the Athenians who are condemning him to death:

[T]here is great reason to hope that death is a blessing, for one of two things must be the case. Either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another place. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by the sight of dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain. . . . [I]f death is the journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the dead are, what blessing, gentlemen of the jury, my friends and judges, could be greater than this? If those arriving in Hades will have escaped from those who call themselves judges here, and will find the true judges who are said to sit in judgment there, . . . would that be a paltry change? What would not a man

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<sup>52</sup> Winnicott, p. 144. See also Winnicott's 1949 "Mind and Its Relation to the Psyche-Soma," available in his *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (Tavistock, 1958).

<sup>53</sup> Craib, p. 194.

give if he might converse with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer?<sup>54</sup>

Over the millennia this, along with the other arguments against fear of death that Plato's Socrates lays out in the dialogues, in the *Phaedo* in particular, have impressed millions, brought an untold quantity of relief, while in no way lessening the human predicament. If Socrates's words are like a drug— Or, I would rather say, *even though* Socrates words can be like a drug, they are a drug of which even he, like a patient on an operating table, required almost constant administration.

## (8)

We return again, though on a more purely philosophical level, to how dialectical conversation helps us in our fight. In *Death and the Disinterested Spectator* Hartle outlines how the “drug” (my term, not hers) works for the Socrates of the *Phaedo*. And from this outline we can and will move to the next level, thinking about what Plato himself “was doing”. And there may be found intimations of what philosophers and intellectuals more generally are doing.

Hartle finds an Archimedean point at Stephanus page 84A where Socrates tells Simmias and Cebes that the soul of a philosopher would reason not that

while philosophy must free it [from the body], it should while being freed surrender itself to pleasures and pains and imprison itself again, thus laboring in vain like Penelope at her web. The soul of the philosopher achieves a calm from such emotions; it follows reason and ever stays with it contemplating the true, the divine, which is not the object of opinion. Nurtured by this, it believes that one should live in this manner as long as one is alive and, after death, arrive at what is akin and of the same kind, and escape from human evils.<sup>55</sup> (My underscoring.)

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<sup>54</sup> *Apology*, 40C-41C, as translated by Jowett though edited with the help of Grube's translation published in *Five Dialogues*. In the *Phaedo* (67E-68A) Socrates comes back to this idea.

<sup>55</sup> Grube's translation, *Five Dialogues*.

We might say that in this passage Socrates advances a misreading of Penelope's behavior, suggesting that her weaving/unraveling was absurd, rather than both purposeful and effective— fending off her many suitors. Hartle, not lost to the effectiveness of Penelope's work, notes how in the *Phaedo* Socrates weaves engaging but faulty arguments for the immortality of the soul, arguments that either he himself soon unravels or that Plato leaves for us readers to unravel at our leisure.

The philosopher, like Penelope weaving and unweaving, is engaged in an endless or futile task. But perhaps, like Penelope, the philosopher's true task is in fact accomplished. It is not a final victory but a holding action.<sup>56</sup>

(Allow me to note my earlier use of the word “holding” in a psychological sense, to refer to the holding of feelings.)

There is no end of philosophers and other thinkers who believe that— due in no small part to Socrates' and Plato's contributions— we have indeed gotten somewhere. Our knowledge keeps growing, and if, compared to the whole of what is known, one's own sum of knowledge is small or large, and even if knowledge is an ever approachable but never attainable goal, still we must be on the right track because our store of knowledge— or of know-how and information, at least— keeps growing, and exponentially. It would take another long essay to argue this point; for present purposes let me just note that if you do not know where you are going to arrive, and if you do not know that arriving somewhere is significant; if you do not know that traveling, being on a path is significant— it is difficult to know is you are on the right track, or if there is any track at all.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Hartle, p. 57, see also pp. 23-25 and 58: The life of argument “is at least a holding action against the irrational, and at the same time, a holding action against fear of death”.

<sup>57</sup> In passing we can recall any number of thinkers, works, schools of thought that propose explicitly or implicitly that travel, searching, gathering knowledge is diversion; the truth lies within. The opening pages of Descartes's *Discours de la méthode* and *Méditations* come quickly to mind, as do Socrates, Thoreau, Emerson, Buddhism, . . .

In valedictory lectures at Cambridge University, Michael Redhead, a philosopher of science, put the matter thusly: “To understand anything requires us to understand everything,” and since this is not possible, how can our particular, provisional understandings be considered understandings at all?<sup>58</sup> More famously, in *The Republic* Socrates asserts:

[W]e have no proper knowledge of the Form of the good. And if we don’t know it, though we should have the fullest possible knowledge of all else, you know that that would be of no use to us, any more than is the possession of anything without the good.<sup>59</sup>

The Hartlean point I wish to stick with here is that Plato and his Socrates can thus be read as heading in quite another direction in which— given the limits of our understanding—the pursuit of knowledge becomes above all a means to keep the conversation, the “holding action,” going. And the holding action that is philosophy, far from demanding certainty or knowledge, thrives and indeed can only survive in the absence of certainty and knowledge. “The threat of skepticism is what keeps the theory of knowledge going,” Barry Stroud proposes in *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* (293). And so we might say regarding Socrates’ chronic unweaving of his own arguments, his trumpeting of his and others’ ignorance, his repeated claim that knowledge is reserved for the gods: Such actions are necessary if the holding action is to hold fast and well, if the conversation is going to go on and on.

As previously suggested, it may well be that, in all-too-human fashion, Socrates—and his wife and children—get tangled up in his chosen *divertissement*. While Socrates may be able

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<sup>58</sup> Redhead, pp. 62 and 86.

<sup>59</sup> *The Republic*, 505. Divergent translations of these famous lines have promoted rather different interpretations. For my present purposes, after a good deal of searching I have chosen a translation by A.D. Lindsay first published in 1906.

to dodge feelings his mortality inspires, the dodging leads to his dying earlier than he otherwise might have.

La seule chose qui nous console de nos misères est le divertissement. Et cependant c'est la plus grande de nos misères. Car c'est cela qui nous empêche principalement de songer à nous, et qui nous fait perdre insensiblement. Sans cela nous serions dans l'ennui et cet ennui nous pousserait à chercher un moyen plus solide d'en sortir, mais le divertissement nous amuse et nous fait arriver insensiblement à la mort.

Diversions are our sole consolation for our difficulties, and also our greatest difficulty. Because it is diversion above all that prevents us from thinking of ourselves and leads us astray without our realizing it. Without diversion we would be constantly anxious, and this anxiety would push us to look for a better means of escape, but our diversions amuse us and bring us, before we even know it, to death.<sup>60</sup>

*Cf.*, the fates of any number of race-car drivers, motorcycle riders and similar risk takers. *Cf.*, on a more sophisticated level, any number of social policies, new technologies that lead to new environmental problems, or our embracing of gadgets that while promising some greater freedom or capacity make us their slaves.

Turning now from Pascal and Socrates to Plato, we may note that not just in the *Phaedo*, but in dialogue after dialogue Plato has Socrates weave and unravel faulty arguments.<sup>61</sup> And Plato has Socrates devote a great deal of his attention to the meanings and definitions of words, while Plato and his Socrates along with him use words as they wish,

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<sup>60</sup> Pascal, pensée 393, my translation. One of the paragraphs from Pascal most often quoted in English does not appear in Le Guern's edition of the *Pensées*, though it does appear in the Brunshvieg edition of the early twentieth century as pensée number 169. An English translation, accessible via the Internet: "Man wishes to be happy, and only wishes to be happy, and cannot wish not to be so. But how will he set about it? To be happy he would have to make himself immortal; but, not being able to do so, it has occurred to him to prevent himself from thinking of death."

<sup>61</sup> *Cf.*, Press, *Plato*, pp. 75-76: "Although arguments and conclusions seem to be so important [in Plato's dialogues], arguments are often hard to follow. It is hard to know, for example, exactly what reasons are being given or what argument is being criticized on exactly what grounds. Worse, as readers delve deeper, the arguments apparently presented by Socrates, Plato's philosophic hero, often seem flawed. Many arguments seem to commit the ad hominem or other basic logical fallacies, such as deliberately using a term equivocally."

honoring existing definitions in the breach, and being consistently inconsistent in their use of (what we have since come to think of as) terminology.<sup>62</sup>

Plato is credited with being a great logician, a man of power in argument. He may have been that in the Academy. He is not that in the dialogues. Here we are confronted with the devices which men use to get the better of themselves and others. Tricks abound. Words are wrested from their familiar use to perform feats for which they were never intended. Adjectives turn into nouns which, losing identification with any concrete thing, turn the adjectives into shadows of something man never saw.<sup>63</sup>

As discussed in the second section, in Plato's dialogues the search for truth via dialectic is unraveled—or shown to be a road to nowhere—by how Socrates turns at crucial moments to myth, to *daemonion ti*. And the unraveling that Plato's character Socrates does pales by comparison with the work Plato the author does—for example, by the simple fact that the dialogues are *mythoi* (myths) parading as *logoi* (explanations). The dialogues are stories of conversations—we don't get a supposed account of Socrates's last hours, or the supposed text of what Phaedo told Plato about them, but rather a supposed account of what Phaedo told someone else, Echebrates.

Taking the matter, or the game, a step further, toward the end of the *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates call the writing of philosophy into question. Socrates asks Phaedrus: "Wouldn't a serious farmer use his knowledge of farming to plant the seeds he cared for when it was appropriate?"

Now what about the man who knows what is just, noble and good? Shall we say that he is less sensible with his needs than the farmer is with his? . . . [H]e won't be serious about writing them in ink, sowing them, through a pen, with words that are as incapable of speaking in their own defense as they are of

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<sup>62</sup> Cf., Press, *Plato*, p. 134: "[D]espite Socrates' insistence that interlocutors be clear about what they mean when they say things, Plato himself is inconsistent about the use of technical terms, including the terms for Forms (*eidos* and *idea*) and knowledge (*epistēmē*, *phronēsis*, *gnōsis*, *sophia* and *technē*)."

<sup>63</sup> Woodbridge, p. 55.

teaching the truth adequately. . . . It is much nobler to be serious about these matters, and use the art of dialectic.<sup>64</sup>

Well, perhaps it is. But the man who wrote those self-mocking lines would seem to have spent his best hours not in conversation but in writing and, as he puts it, twisting what he had written around, “pasting parts together and taking them apart.”<sup>65</sup>

Last but hardly least in this unraveling, there is Plato’s predilection for a certain type of interlocutor: people whose judgment had proved quite faulty—e.g., Alcibiades, Nicias, Critias, Charmides, Meno, Anytus.<sup>66</sup> Plato knew his readers (when he was writing) would not fail to appreciate how little such people had gained from discussing virtue with the master (Socrates).

## (9)

There are times reading the *Phaedo* when we may laugh aloud, and it is certainly easy enough to imagine Socrates delivering certain lines with a devilish smile on his face.<sup>67</sup> For example, from 66E, “And one day, we may suppose, that intelligence which we desire and whose lovers we claim to be will be ours: . . . when we have died.”

There was a moment when this perspective and re-reading the self-mocking end of the *Phaedrus* led me to think for some reason of the dancers who come to entertain the diners in the *Symposium*. My free-flowing imagination produced a vision of Plato and his

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<sup>64</sup> *Phaedrus*, 275D and 276B-E. *N.B.*: Not only have I skipped past many of Socrates’ statements here; I have also skipped Phaedrus’ responses to Socrates’ questions.

<sup>65</sup> *Phaedrus*, 278D.

<sup>66</sup> *Cf.* Tuckey, pp. 2-5, where, at least as regards the *Charmides*, Tuckey identifies Plato’s task as examining why the aristocrats, to include members of Plato’s own family, had not “responded to Socrates’ teaching, or rather, since he professed to have nothing to teach, why had not his *elenchus* freed them from their moral defects?”

<sup>67</sup> For an obvious joke see 72E-73A where Cebes, one of Socrates’ two main interlocutors, recalls Socrates’ idea that learning is recollection, and Simmias, the other interlocutor, interrupts: “But how is that proved, Cebes? Please remind me, as I can’t quite remember at the moment.”

friends as members of an aristocrats' club, withdrawn from the dangers and compromises of public life, amusing themselves with philosophical ideas.<sup>68</sup> Socrates, the mason's son, was a gifted entertainer. I imagined the aristocrats laughing at Socrates after he went on his way.

Even today, were one to spend much time in bars, one could come across the character who entertains a small crowd with his disputatiousness—the more self-contradictory and otherwise outrageous his opinions, the better. No one ever willingly does wrong, it is worse to do wrong than to be the victim of wrongdoing, virtue is knowledge and knowledge virtue. “You all think you know things that in fact you don't, whereas I know I know nothing!”<sup>69</sup> “It's ridiculous enough for people like me to spend their entire lives half-dead. What business do we have complaining when the real thing comes?”<sup>70</sup>

Surely Gerald Press's sober assessment of what Socrates and Plato are doing is closer to the mark:

The contrast, between the playful character who is Plato's serious hero [i.e., Socrates], and the characters who represent various ways of being ignorant and failing to do right [e.g., Euthyphro, Critias, the *Symposium* speakers besides Socrates and Aristophanes], suggests the idea that instead of a simple opposition between play and seriousness, Plato considers what philosophy is, what Socrates does and he himself does, as serious play.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> As regards the *Phaedrus*, see pp. 276-78. There is a less contentious way of viewing this “aristocratic club.” To just touch on it here, I will quote from the historian Josiah Ober's *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens* (page 5): “In an atmosphere of profound disillusionment with practical attempts to establish a nondemocratic government at Athens, the elite Athenian critics of popular rule set themselves the arduous task of reinventing political dissent. This meant, in the democratic Athenian environment, finding new grounds for explaining what was wrong with ‘the power of the people’ and describing alternate visions of consensual and noncoercive—yet nondemocratic—political societies. The result was a set of robust and highly original approaches to political philosophy.”

<sup>69</sup> A bastardization of lines of Socrates in the *Apology* (21D), where he describes trying to find someone wiser than himself and engaging in conversation a leading Athenian, a man who was considered wise and considered himself wise. But Socrates concludes, “It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of; but he thinks that he knows something when he does not, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate, it seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.”

<sup>70</sup> A bastardization of one of Socrates' lines in the *Phaedo* (67E): “[I]t would be ridiculous that a man should spend his life in a way that brought him as near as possible to being dead, and then complain of death when it came.”

<sup>71</sup> Press, *Plato*, p. 123. Near the opening of the *Phaedo*, Plato makes one of his rare autobiographical references, having Phaedo remark as regards Plato's non-appearance on Socrates's last day: “Plato, I believe, was unwell.” What is Plato up to with this line? Trying to deflect attention from the fact that he had stayed away from

(10)

We have come to the final riff. Where have we come to? If we cannot attain the knowledge we seek and do not much want the knowledge we have, and if knowledge in any case cannot save us, what are we doing pursuing it?

We are seeking, as Pascal proposed, to get to our deaths without having recognized just how disturbed we are by our mortality. The spirit with which Plato's Socrates faces his death is not unlike that with which, in *The Iliad*, Achilles and Hector go into battle, knowing the result will be their deaths. Presumably they are able to fight so well (and so pointlessly) because, caught up in the battle, they forget—or, if you will, cease to know—the foreordained result. Socrates at the end of his life makes much of the hope that he—and the human individual more generally—might actually win in the end as a result of our bodies reaching their end and our souls enjoying either undisturbed sleep or getting to commune and converse with those who have died before us.<sup>72</sup> Without putting overmuch faith in this hope, but happily engaged talking about it, Plato's Socrates hardly feels a thing when he dies.<sup>73</sup>

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Socrates' jail cell not because he was unwell but out of fear that the anti-oligarchical rage that had condemned Socrates might next turn on other aristocrats, such as him? Confessing, though not without playfulness, that with Socrates's death the serious play had become too serious?

In a note to his translation of the *Phaedo* (29, n. 2), Reginald Hackforth, who was a professor of ancient philosophy at Cambridge, states that Phaedo's choice of words indicates that Plato's illness "must be accepted as a fact." Perhaps it was simply an acute intestinal disorder that made Plato's leaving home all but impossible. One can well imagine Plato sick—sick at the thought of what, above all, was going to happen: Socrates was going to die. Was he sick, too, because he felt that Socrates, in the thrall of his self-image and caught up in Athenian politics, was going to die well before he needed to and while pretending that death was not such a terrible thing?

Hartle (82) proposes that Plato's absence from the *Phaedo* "may suggest that Plato disagrees with Socrates' opinion that he should remain in prison and accept the penalty," or it "may indicate an unwillingness to associate himself with this defense of philosophy." (Is she thinking in particular of the defense Plato's character Socrates presents in Plato's text? or what the historical Socrates said at his trial and subsequently?)

<sup>72</sup> Socrates proposes this in the *Apology*, 40C-41C. See the end of section (8) for a quotation from that speech.

<sup>73</sup> For many years it has generally been thought that the poison Socrates ingested was a type of hemlock that would induce a most painful death—and readers so informed have felt that it was only thanks to his demeanor

Thus we note the following paradoxical (non)problem of philosophy. Insofar as the *divertissement* that is philosophy is based in an idea of seeking to comprehend what it means to be human and the most basic terms of human life, using this approach to avoid consideration of—and to avoid feeling—what it feels like to be mortal and to face death, is to get lost—and perhaps happily lost—along the way. Whatever Plato’s intention may have been, the intellectual hero who has emerged from the *Phaedo* (or from the *Phaedo* and the *Apology*) has, off and on over many years, helped human beings—for any better and for any worse—deny or ignore what Craib, in the passage previously quoted at length, stresses: the regrets, unfinished business, hatred and bitterness, the final, unrepenting, incurable disappointment involved in being mortal.

One of the assertions of this essay has been that the *Phaedo* is not so much an intellectual work as an emotional one. If we cannot have the knowledge we seek, what are we doing pursuing it? Some of us are trying—as best we can, in a way that works for us though not for everyone—to get some help, to find the strength we need to go on, with the end in sight.

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and philosophizing that Socrates was able to meet his death so calmly. In an article in the 2001 *Journal of the International Plato Society*, Enid Bloch, a SUNY Buffalo adjunct professor, went to a good deal of length to prove that the drug Socrates in fact ingested would have led him to die “gently and peacefully, just as Plato said he did”. So much for philosophy, we might say.

Hartle, writing 15 years earlier, suggested that Phaedo’s claim that Socrates remained not only emotionally but physically calm after he drank the hemlock calls our attention to the fact that Phaedo’s (and Plato’s) account is myth-making and not to be trusted. See Hartle, pp. 31-36 and 44.

I would tackle this issue in another way. In order for us to confront our concerns in dialogues, plays, novels, movies and so forth, we need to be reassured that the script is fiction, otherwise the material could be too disturbing. For this purpose, the poison and its effects, whatever they may have been, come too late in the dialogue. At the beginning of the dialogue, however, we are given the “Plato, I believe, was unwell”—Plato’s extremely rare reference to himself. A chief function of this statement, and particularly of the “I believe” Plato slips in, is to assure us that we are entering a make-believe world.

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<sup>74</sup> As noted in the main body of this essay, this dialogue, often referred to in English as the Alcibiades I, may well not have been written by Plato. The scrupulous Plato scholar Holger Thesleff notes, regarding the Alcibiades I and several other texts: “As semiauthentic I would class a text that was not actually written (or dictated) by Plato, but was produced by a friend or personal pupil of his, in his name, and in accordance with what was felt to be his thought, style and intentions. . . . I consider this kind of nonfraudulent ‘school accumulation’ normal before the Hellenistic age with its greater demands on an author’s individuality.” Thesleff, “Looking for Clues: An Interpretation of Some Literary Aspects of Plato’s ‘Two-Level Model,’” in Press, *Plato’s Dialogues*, 32, n. 35.

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