Fear of Death in Plato’s *Phaedo* (and *Apology*)

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What is Socrates’ reason for not fearing death? How integral is his putative belief in the soul’s immortality to his cheerfulness and calm in the face of death, a phenomenon highlighted in the *Phaedo* but noted as well in the *Apology* and *Crito*? It will be argued below that Socrates’ remark in the *Apology* that neither he nor any other human being can know if death is a good thing or a bad (*Ap. 29a-b*) is in full force in the *Phaedo*, and that his sanguinity in the face of death is nearly entirely unrelated to the question of the soul’s immortality. It is not Socrates’ fear of death or his need for proof of the immortality of the soul that drives the dialogue, but rather his interlocutors’ fears and needs.

The final challenge Cebes sets for Socrates in the *Phaedo* (*87b-88c*) is to prove that the soul is not simply long-lasting but that it is immortal—that is, that it will outlive any body it inhabits. This challenge arises in reaction to Socrates’ description at *84a-b* of the philosopher’s soul as one that has been freed of the tyranny of pleasure and pain, lives in accordance with reason, and gazes upon and is nurtured by the true and divine and objective. As a consequence of its freedom from pleasure and pain and its nurture by the true and divine, Socrates maintains, the philosopher’s soul believes that it ought to continue to live in this same way for as long as it is alive, and that after death it will join that to which it is akin, leaving behind human ills. A soul of this kind, nurtured in this way, he further contends, would hardly fear its dissipation or dispersion or nonexistence upon its separation from the body. What Cebes thinks, however, is that in the absence of proof of the soul’s immortality, it is foolish *not* to fear death (*88b*); indeed, in Socrates’ uncontested recapitulation of his view at *95b-e*, the philosopher’s confidence that he will fare better in Hades as a result of the kind of life he has led in this world is misplaced if there are insufficient grounds for the belief that the soul lives on in Hades. The challenge to which Socrates responds in the *Phaedo* is thus interestingly different from the one with which he is presented in the *Apology*, where he takes it upon himself to reassure the members of the jury who voted for his acquittal that nothing bad will happen specifically to him post mortem (*41c-d*).\(^1\) Yet, in both dialogues, Socrates find himself having to comfort men who are afraid.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Note, first, the sign that fails to make an appearance is Socrates’ private sign; its silence can only signify that *Socrates is not headed for something bad, that he is “about to do something good”* (*Ap. 40c3*). Thus, when Socrates concludes from his sign’s absence that it is likely that those who assume that it is bad to be dead do not make the correct supposition, what he surely intends is that there are no grounds for the belief that to be dead is bad for everyone. Second, when Socrates describes life in Hades, he conjures up a world in which *he* would thrive, one that embodies his vision of “inconceivable happiness” *améchanon . . . eudaimonias* (*Ap. 41c3-4*): who else would be encouraged by the prospect of (1) meeting dead men who were unjustly judged during their lifetimes, and (2) practicing elenchus to eternity? Socrates even says: “since especially for myself (*emoige kai autóï*), spending time
In taking up Cebes’ challenge at Phaedo 96a, Socrates provides an autobiographical sketch in which he records his disappointment with Anaxagoras. As Socrates reports, Anaxagoras, despite having assigned to Nous the loftiest perch within his natural causal hierarchy, nevertheless fails to put it to use; all the real work, Socrates complains, is done in Anaxagoras’s scheme by such elements as air, ether, and water. Socrates, for his part, is convinced that there can be only one real cause, all other proposed causes being in effect only necessary conditions—things without which a cause could not be a cause. The sole genuine cause, he maintains, is “what is best” (97d). If only Anaxagoras had explained natural phenomena in terms of what is best, Socrates would have been satisfied; as things stand, however, he is compelled to look elsewhere. We might say, then, that what Socrates had hoped to find in Anaxagoras was lower-case nous, a kind of intelligence at work in the universe akin to that which guided Socrates in his decision to remain in prison, the kind that guided—or misguided—the Athenians in their decision to convict Socrates and put him to death.

The ensuing discussion is puzzling for several reasons, not least of which is that in providing his own account of causation Socrates utterly neglects the matter of “what is best.” There is no trace in what follows of lower-case nous as a cause, yet Socrates offers no explanation—beyond his personal frustration—for abandoning the search for a teleological cause in favor of what looks to be a purely formal one. He supplies “safe” causes and then somewhat more daring ones; but not a single cause that he advances has anything to do with either rationality or goodness. Although the first set of causes Socrates cites contains the Beautiful itself-by-itself paired with the Good, he immediately adds the Big (mega) along with “all the rest” (talla panta) (100b). If one expects Socrates to credit the Beautiful and Good with influencing the cosmos and its contents in accordance with “what is best” (as Socrates expected Anaxagoras to do with his Nous), one cannot but be deeply disappointed in Socrates—as Socrates was in Anaxagoras. Instead of air, ether, and water, we hear about a whole array of causes—from Beauty Itself, to the Big and the Small, to the Even and Twoness, to the Odd and three, to Heat and Cold, to fire and snow, and, finally, to Life and soul. Why is someone taller than someone else? Not, to be sure, because of “a head,” but also not because it is best that he be so; he is so because of Tallness. Why are there two when one thing is added to another? Not because of there would be wondrous” (41a8–b1). And third, even the idea that the gods take care of good men likewise says more about how Socrates is likely to fare upon his death than about the effects of death generally.

2 Socrates refers both to the jurors who voted for his acquittal and to Simmias and Cebes as his “judges” (dikastai – Ap. 40a; Phaedo 63e).

3 These elements resurface in the myth at the dialogue’s end.

4 There is a single mention of oneness in relation to the Odd at 105c.
addition, but also not because of “what is best”; two arises because of Twoness. In this entire discussion, goodness and intelligence cause nothing.

It is true, of course, that Socrates introduces his formal causal account with the caveat that it is a deuterōs plous (99d), a second sailing, a second-best. Interestingly, in so characterizing his view Socrates in effect pursues the course of inquiry Simmias had charted at 85b-d. Young Simmias, a person who is just about the least likely—with the possible exception of Cebes—to succumb to misology, prefaces his presentation of his final criticism of Socrates’ defense of the immortality of the soul, as follows. No one, he says, can have precise knowledge in this matter—since such knowledge is impossible or exceedingly difficult to attain in the present life—but one must persist, testing proposed views in every way; one who abandons the search is malthakos, weak or soft. One must either learn, or discover, how things stand. If these prove impossible, one must select the best and most irrefutable of human logos and, “embarking on this, sail through (diapleusai) the dangers of life as upon a raft.” It is surely this voyage that Socrates has in mind when he speaks of his own deuterōs plous, the one to which he has recourse when he, as he says, could neither learn from another nor discover on his own the teleological cause he sought (99c-d). For Simmias, however, even “the best and most irrefutable of human logos” is no more secure than a flimsy raft, and hence not a reliable support as one navigates “the dangers of life.” His preference is for a divine logos, a firmer vessel on which one would make the journey more safely (asphalasteron) and less riskily (akindunoteron). Note, however, that the logos that Socrates touts as safest (at 100d, 100e) is the one he presents as his own, namely, the thesis that Forms are causes; it is this one, he thinks, in which the fearful inquirer takes refuge (101a, b, and c).

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6 This term is reminiscent of the Meno’s malakoi (81d5), who find Meno’s “eristic” argument pleasing because it brings the search to a swift end.

7 This too is reminiscent of the Meno. One learns from another if there is someone who knows. Meno might have learned from Gorgias about virtue if virtue was something that could be known and taught. Otherwise, one searches on one’s own or jointly with another.

8 Socrates says that for the sake of learning how such a cause works he would “gladly become the pupil of anyone” (99c).

9 The other mention of safety in the Phaedo is at 61a, where Socrates explains his composing of poetry as a way of playing it safe. Socrates also plays with this idea by speaking of the safe and sound (sōn) retreat of the uncold when it
Socrates deems safe as well even the “more refined” (kompzoteran) causes that he subsequently identifies, such as snow and fire, two and three (105b)—even if they are not quite as safe as the first set of “safe and ignorant” causes (105c), such as cold, hot, odd, and even. If for Socrates it is his deiters plous that is safe, then for him this human logos is more secure than any alternative divine logos. Indeed, he explicitly casts doubt on the veracity of the divine tale of the afterlife invoked at the dialogue’s end: “No sensible man would insist on (diischurisasthai) these things’ being as I have described them” (114d).10

But, how much more satisfying is Socrates’ account than Anaxagoras’s discredited one? Relinquishing, seemingly prematurely, his hope of finding the right sort of account—an account in terms of what is best—Socrates settles for one that isn’t quite right, giving several indications that he is less than enamored of his own soon-to-be proposed thesis. First, as he introduces his foray into natural philosophy and his fruitless encounter with Anaxagoras, he characterizes his own view as “confused,” a “jumble” (phuro – 97b). And, by so designating it, Socrates anticipates that it will be guilty of the very misstep with which he is about to charge the antiologikoi at 101e, that of “jumbling together” (phuroio) a starting-point or principle or premise (arche) with what follows from it. In addition, as we noted, Socrates later says (at 105c1), of his explanation in terms of Forms, not merely that it is safe but that it is “safe and ignorant” (asphale and amathe), an explanation he clings to “simply and artlessly” (haplos and atechnos). And, at the argument’s conclusion, when Celes confesses to having some reservations about the argument, Socrates does not protest but rather approves (107b).

Socrates’ safe formal argument can, however, be faulted at almost every turn. Having secured his interlocutors’ agreement to the view that there are Forms (100b), Socrates proceeds to dismiss some of the more common explanations of, for example, a thing’s being beautiful: rather than account for its beauty in terms of, say, its color or shape, Socrates opts for the contentless and uninformative explanation that it is beautiful by sharing in the Beautiful. One wonders if this cause, though surely safe enough—and perhaps precisely because of its safeness—is itself anything more than a necessary condition, as were Anaxagoras’s air, water, and ether, and, for that matter, Socrates’ bones and sinews, without which his sitting in prison rather than

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10 cf. Meno 86b, where Socrates uses the same term to demur at the conclusion of the geometry demonstration. Socrates uses it as well at Phaedo 63b-c to signal his uncertainty regarding entering the company of good men upon his death though not regarding entering the company of good gods. See, too, Phaedo 100d, where Socrates again uses this term, this time to express his diffidence with respect to the precise nature of the relationship between the Form and the corresponding particular, though not with respect to the claim that it is by the Beautiful that beautiful things are beautiful.
escaping to Megara or Boeotia would not have been possible. For, to say that something is beautiful by the Beautiful is arguably not to explain at all why it is beautiful; it is only to specify that without which it could not be beautiful. To be sure, answers such as “by a head” to the question of what causes one person to be taller than another, or “by coming together” to what causes there to be two, generate contradictions, and so are worse answers than “by Tallness” or “by Twoness.” And color and shape are certainly worse accounts than “by the Beautiful” of why something is beautiful—because these fall short of supplying even necessary conditions. Nevertheless, to say “by Tallness” or “by Twoness” or “by the Beautiful” is not to explain anything.

Next, it appears that Socrates commits here something very like the fallacy with which he charges the antilogikoi, that of mixing together in discussion the starting-point with its consequences. For although Socrates concludes the first part of his argument with the statement that, “the opposite itself can never become its opposite, whether that in us or that in nature” (103b), which certainly seems to imply that the Forms in nature and their manifestations in us work on two distinct planes—just as the Form Tall does not admit the Form Short, so does the tallness in us not admit shortness—nevertheless, as Socrates proceeds, it appears that in some cases what instantiators of the Forms cannot admit is the Form that is the opposite of the Form they instantiate. In the case of fire, for example, which brings with it the Form Hot, what it cannot admit is not its opposite, for it has none, but the opposite of the Form Hot, namely, the Form Cold. And Two, which brings with it the Form Even cannot admit the opposite of the Form Even, namely, the Form Odd. Socrates, then, in discussing all these things together, seems to have mixed up the starting-point, that is, his two hypotheses concerning (1) the relationship between Forms and their instantiations, and (2) how the Forms and their particular instantiators each behave with respect to their own opposites, with its consequence, according to which some instantiators operate not with respect to their own Forms, and not with respect to their own opposites, but with respect to Forms that are the opposites of the Forms they instantiate.12

And there is yet another problem with Socrates’ argument: his shameless introduction of the “going away” (aperchesthai) option: what does it mean to say that an opposite, if it is not destroyed by the approach of its opposite, “goes away”? Where could it go? Two cannot accept oddness and remain two; but does it “go away”? Does snow “go away” when heat approaches, or

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11 The tallness and shortness “in us” paves the way for the later introduction of a soul in a body.

12 Another way in which the starting-point and its consequences may be construed as jumbled is by noticing that the argument might have proceeded just as well entirely without the starting-point. Indeed, Socrates regularly offers arguments concerning the soul, both in the Phaedo itself and elsewhere, without recourse to its connection to the particular Form, Life. See, e.g., the argument at Rep. 1.352d-354a, where Socrates uses the idea that (one of the) soul’s function(s) is to live, to argue that unless the soul is just a person cannot live well.
is it eliminated? It is painfully evident that Socrates plants the going-away option so that he can conclude that the soul goes away when death approaches. And, conveniently, he even has a place, namely, awaiting the soul's arrival (106e-107a).

Finally, one wonders if it is possible to take Socrates’ asking if a thing that is deathless is not also therefore indestructible as a genuine step in the argument as opposed to another set-up. Consider, for example, this passage from the *Meno* at 81b, which cites the words of certain priests and priestesses and of some poets: “They say that the human soul is immortal; at times it comes to an end, which they call dying, at times it is reborn, but it is never destroyed” (*apollusthai d’ oudepote*). Here, the immortality of the soul just is its indestructibility. And we note that Cebes sees no need for an argument to prove that the immortal is indestructible (106d).

To be sure, Socrates has a purpose in arguing for the immortality of the soul; but his purpose is not to prove the immortality of the soul. It is, rather, as he explicitly says, to encourage people to live right, that is, to become “as good and wise as possible” (107d). It would seem, then, that Socrates takes up the matter of causes in order to defend the immortality of the soul, but he defends immortality in order to promote a life of virtue. Why do people want to know if the soul is immortal? Because, as Socrates points out, “If death were escape from everything, it would be a great boon to the wicked to get rid of the body and of their wickedness together with their soul” (107c).

Neither Simmias nor Cebe, of course, is wicked. Their reason for raising the question of the immortality of the soul is not that they are hoping death is the end but because they are hoping it is not. Whereas in the *Apology* Socrates must comfort those who suspect death will not be the end, in the *Phaedo*, he must allay the fears of those who suspect that it will be. In the *Apology*, Socrates provides his judges with reason to hope that the good man will fare well in the afterlife; in the *Phaedo*, it is the philosopher whose happy fate needs to be assured. In the *Apology*, it is the anxiety of his supporters that Socrates seeks to alleviate; in the *Phaedo* he aims to refute Simmias’s and Cebe’s arguments: since it is they who believe that fear of death is rational unless one can prove that the soul is immortal (95b-c), Socrates offers arguments that have some chance of persuading *them*.

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13 The same occurs in the *Meno’s* recollection thesis, where, after all is said and done, what Socrates admits he had hoped to accomplish is to encourage people to be active inquirers (and perhaps to live piously - 81b)—and not to prove either recollection or the immortality of the soul with which it is intertwined. One might argue that in our *Phaedo* passage the neglect of philosophy in Socrates’ summation shows Socrates’ recognition that Simmias and Cebe are no philosophers.

14 It seems evident that Socrates argues that the soul "departs" at the approach of death and enters Hades, in order to provide an incentive, to those who need one, to live justly. The is no comparable incentive for living philosophically.
In the *Apology*, what Socrates fears is determined by which of two alternatives he judges worse: when he must choose between doing wrong and death—that is, between something he knows to be both bad and shameful and something whose badness is uncertain—the right choice, the best choice, the choice less to be feared, is the one whose badness is uncertain: death (29b). In the *Phaedo*, too, the right choice seems to be the one that is the better of the alternatives. Note the otherwise gratuitous point Socrates makes in connection with his search for the genuine cause of things. After he says, “On this reasoning, then, it is fitting for one to investigate only, about this and other things, what is best,” he continues: “Necessarily, the same man knows what is worse, for the same knowledge pertains to [both of] them” (97d). And he makes the identical point a bit later: “I eagerly seized his [Anaxagoras's] books and read them as quickly as possible in order to know as quickly as possible the best and the worst” (98b). Socrates in the *Phaedo* (98d-99b) reminds his friends that he determines his course of action by weighing his alternatives: “acting with my nous,” I “chose the best” (99a-b; also, 98c). “What is best” is thus the cause of his being imprisoned now in Athens rather than free in Megara or Boeotia (98e-99a).

The implication in both dialogues seems to be that fear of death is trumped when there is something to be feared more—something worse—which is its (only) alternative. As far as Socrates is concerned, all one needs to know in order not to fear death is that it is the best of the available alternatives, or, in other words, that the other alternatives are worse. Once one knows that remaining alive is a worse option under the prevailing conditions, one knows to fear life rather than death.

Socrates’ tranquility and good humor, then, in the face of death (Phaedo 58e) has little to do with a belief in immortality of the soul—though he expresses hope in this regard (63c, 64a, 67b-c, 68a, 70a). As we have seen, Socrates registers his misgivings about the argument he offers for the soul’s immortality and indestructibility even before he offers it. And, after his argument ends, he proceeds to consider the moral to be drawn “if the soul is immortal” (107c). Socrates has indeed warned his interlocutors—and Plato, his readers—in advance of the causation-arguments that no cause is a real cause unless it is a reasoned and thoughtful consideration of what is best under the circumstances. Thus, Socrates’ friends ought to be of good cheer about his death, not because Socrates’ soul is not about to meet its end, but because Socrates, recognizing what is worse, has chosen better.

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15 Note the very last line of the *Apology*: “Which of us goes to a better thing”—I who am going to dying and you who are going to living—“is unclear to everyone except the god.” (42a).

16 Cf. *Ap.* 40c4: “how great a hope there is” that death is good; also 41c8.

17 Cf. *Ap.* 40e5-6, 41a8, 41c6-7, for similar “if”s.
When death, however, is not a choice, specifically, when it does not involve a choice between acting in accordance with the just and the right, on the one side, and avoiding death, on the other—in other words, when it is not the case that the price of avoiding death is doing wrong—is there not, as Cebes believes, good reason to fear death in such a case, in the absence of any definitive proof that death is not a bad thing? Would it not indeed be foolish not to fear it?

It is evident that for Socrates there is nothing that death could possibly be that would make it worthwhile to live in any way other than justly or philosophically. No matter what is on the other side of the equation, it is always worse to do wrong and to live an unexamined life (Ap. 38a). Indeed, the very fact that Socrates’ interlocutors raise the question of the fate of the soul after death reveals them to be both unphilosophical and less than thoroughly virtuous. Any philosopher or truly good man lives as he does because he believes it to be the best way to live. If Simmias and Cebes were such men, they could not doubt the value of having lived philosophically regardless of whether their souls would live on and fare best in Hades. No true philosopher gives the matter of the afterlife a second thought. Consider what Socrates says about the true philosopher in the Republic: unlike the guardians of Book 3 who can be kept from cowardice only by being assured that Hades is not so bad (386a-b), a true philosopher, a person who has a genuinely philosophic nature, does not have so high a regard for human life that he would see death as something terrible (6.486a-b). In other words, for a true philosopher, the non-philosophical charms of human life hold no appeal, and so death represents no great loss. Indeed, Socrates describes himself in the Apology as one who, “not caring for the things that the many do” (Ap. 36b), does not “even care about death in any way at all” (Ap. 32d); death is simply of no consequence to a true philosopher. The philosopher’s experience as Socrates describes it at 84a-b is one that fills him with confidence and precludes fear. Proof is not only impossible but irrelevant.

The Republic’s Cephalus is instructive with regard to the difference between the attitude toward death of the genuinely just man and that of the spuriously just one. Coming rather belatedly to the belief that the afterlife may prove unforgiving to the wicked, Cephalus turns to prayer and sacrifice and attends to unpaid debts lest he enter Hades an unjust man who displeases the gods. The very fact that he is moved to sudden righteousness out of fear of the afterlife reveals the shallowness of his newfound justice. It is someone like Cephalus who is targeted in Socrates’ remark in the Phaedo that it would be a great boon to the wicked were death the end. Yet what death is is unknown. How can the wicked then rest easy? The truly virtuous, however, having chosen as their course what is best, always rest easy.

It is in the end only those who are tethered to this world and its pleasures and rewards who are concerned about what happens afterwards. This is a persistent theme in the dialogue, variously expressed. (See, especially, 68b-c; but see also 64c-68b; 82b-84b.) To know the true
cause of generation and destruction is to know that the only cause of faring well is living as one ought, in accordance with what is better as determined by lower-case *nous*. Socrates, as he says in the *Crito* (46b), does on every occasion what seems best to him upon reflection. Simmias and especially Cebes, however, despite their embrace of certain doctrines—the theory of Forms and the recollection thesis—and despite their obvious love of argument, are not sufficiently detached from the world to live truly philosophically and virtuously, and consequently to face death with equanimity. Like Evenus who would be in no great hurry to die (61c), Simmias and Cebes are not philosophers. In the final analysis, of all those gathered in Socrates’ cell to witness his final moments on earth, the only genuine philosopher is Socrates.

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18 Socrates is apparently less convinced of the truth of these theses than Simmias and Cebes are. See *Phaedo* 76d-77a, where Socrates concludes that the soul exists before birth if the forms exist, something about which Simmias and Cebes register absolutely no misgivings. See, too, *Phaedo* 107b, where Socrates says with regard to the initial hypotheses: “even if you put your trust (*pistai*) in them, they should be examined more clearly.” Cf. *Meno* 86b-c, where, after having argued at length for the recollection thesis, Socrates concedes that the only thing he would “fight all out for” if he could, in both word and deed, is that we will be “more manly and less lazy” if we search than if we do not.

19 The true philosopher is detached: see 64c-67b.

20 The myth with which the dialogue closes presents philosophy as one step higher than extreme piety on a progressive ladder of ascent. Philosophy, however, is not just greater piety. Socrates says little here about how philosophy differs, arguably because he knows he is not speaking to true philosophers.
La Crainte de la mort dans le Phédon (et l’Apologie) de Platon

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Quelle raison Socrate a-t-il de ne pas craindre la mort ? Nous montrerons que la remarque de Socrate dans l’Apologie, selon laquelle ni lui ni personne ne peut savoir si la mort est un bien ou un mal (Ap. 29a-b), prend toute sa force dans le Phédon, et qu’il est confiant face à la mort parce qu’il a mené une vie philosophique et juste. Les arguments du Phédon pour l’immortalité de l’âme résultent des craintes des interlocuteurs de Socrate, Simmias et Cébès, qui, quoiqu’aimant l’argumentation et consentant même à adopter la Théorie des Formes et la thèse de la réminiscence, ne sont pas véritablement philosophes comme l’est Socrate.

Le dernier défi que Cébès lance à Socrate dans le Phédon (87b-88c) est de prouver que l’âme n’a pas seulement une existence durable mais qu’elle est immortelle – c’est à dire qu’elle survivra à tout corps qu’elle se trouve habiter. Ce défi apparaît en réaction à la description faite par Socrate en 84a-b de l’âme du philosophe comme celle qui a été libérée de la tyrannie du plaisir et de la douleur, vivant selon la raison, et contemple ce qui est vrai et divin et objectif et s’en nourrit. Une telle âme, insiste Socrate, n’a guère à craindre d’être dissoute ou dispersée ou de cesser d’exister une fois séparée du corps. Cébès pense toutefois qu’en l’absence d’une preuve de l’immortalité de l’âme, ce qui est déraisonnable c’est de ne pas craindre la mort (88b). Comme dans l’Apologie, où Socrate se met en devoir de rassurer les membres du jury qui ont voté pour son acquittement quant au fait qu’il ne lui arrivera rien de mal après la mort (41c-d), Socrate se trouve à nouveau obligé dans le Phédon de réconforter des hommes qui ont peur.

Quand il accepte le défi de Cébès à partir de Phédon 96a, Socrate fournit une esquisse biographique dans laquelle il raconte sa déception au sujet d’Anaxagore. Ce que Socrate avait espéré trouver chez Anaxagore, peut-on dire, était en fait un nous en caractères minuscules, une sorte d’intelligence à l’œuvre dans l’univers semblable à celle qui a guidé Socrate dans sa décision de rester en prison. Contrairement à ce qu’on pouvait attendre, cependant, dans la discussion qui suit, Socrate néglige complètement la question du “meilleur”, remplaçant une explication téléologique par une explication causale purement formelle, et appelant celle-ci un deuteros plous (99d), une deuxième sorte de navigation, une explication de deuxième ordre. L’argument qu’il avance s’avère déficient à bien des égards. En fin de compte, ce qu’il espère, ce n’est pas d’avoir prouvé l’immortalité de l’âme, mais d’en avoir dit assez pour encourager les gens à vivre bien, c’est à dire à devenir “aussi bons et sages que possible” (107d).

Ce qui semble sous-entendu aussi bien dans le Phédon que dans l’Apologie, c’est que la crainte de la mort est surmontée quand il y a quelque chose qui est plus à craindre – quelque chose de pire – que la (seule) possibilité restante. Aux yeux de Socrate, tout ce que l’on a besoin de savoir pour ne pas craindre la mort est que celle-ci est la meilleure des solutions disponibles, en d’autres termes, que les autres solutions sont pires. Une fois que l’on sait que rester en vie est
un choix pire dans les conditions données, on sait que l’on doit craindre la vie plutôt que la mort. Mais lorsque la mort n’est pas un choix, ce qui serait déraisonnable ne serait-ce pas, comme le croit Cèbès, de ne pas la craindre ?

Il est évident que pour Socrate, quoi que la mort puisse être, cela ne pourrait faire qu’il ne vaille pas la peine de vivre autrement que d’une manière juste et philosophique. Tout philosophe ou homme vraiment bon vit comme il le fait parce qu’il croit que c’est la meilleure façon de vivre. Aucun philosophe véritable n’accorde une pensée à la question de l’au-delà. Si Simmias et Cèbès étaient de vrais philosophes, ils ne pourraient douter – quoi qu’il arrive – de la valeur d’avoir vécu philosophiquement.