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Ceaselessly Testing the Good of Death
By Danielle A. Layne

In the Apology Socrates composedly rebuts his accusers despite the threat of the death penalty. Confidently saying that he would never desert his military or religious posts for fear of death, he argues that only the ignorant and falsely conceited fear the cessation of life. In fact, Socrates insists that their fear results from an unsubstantiated identification of death with evil. To erode this widespread prejudice, he urges his fellow citizens to reexamine their belief because the dread of death reveals their participation with the worst form of ignorance i.e. double ignorance or the ignorance of ignorance combined with a conceit to knowledge.¹ As in many early dialogues Socrates, in contradistinction to those who believe they know when they do not, advocates a kind of skepticism or suspension of judgment concerning the value of death and the afterlife and, in doing so, calmly accepts his punishment.²

In striking contrast to the Apology, in the Phaedo Socrates makes bold assertions about death and the afterlife. Here, in the hours before his execution, Socrates’ collected demeanor does not seem to derive from a skeptical stance but from an identification of death with a great good—a migration to a better world.³ As is often thought, in the middle dialogues it appears that Plato wavers from the aporetic, skeptical Socrates and begins to assert his own, positive epistemological claims. Yet, as a dramatist who constantly minded the importance of crafting consistent characters and relevant contexts, Plato’s decision to set this more optimistic philosophy at the crucial moment of Socrates’ execution seems suspicious since it would evidently compromise Socrates’ earlier epistemology; primarily his avowals of ignorance regarding death and his related commitment to the examined life. In many ways then the use of Socrates’ voice at such a dire moment could mean at least one of two things: either Plato thought the prospect of immanent death acts as a catalyst and produces a desperate optimism in Socrates comparable to the hackneyed expression that “there are no atheists in foxholes” or Plato considered these positive epistemological statements compatible with the Socrates of the early dialogues, e.g. Laches, Protagoras and the Apology. The former demands an about-face of Socratic epistemology; the latter allows for the cohesion of Socratic thought if the

³ Cf. PLATO, Phaedo 63b.
interjection can be deemed complementary to other dialogues. Concentrating on the latter solution, the question must focus on Plato’s apparent contention that the previously incredulous Socrates has gained reliable and justified knowledge, culminating in the philosopher’s forfeiture of his claim to ignorance with regard to death and the after-life.⁴ If Socrates acknowledges his possession of knowledge, then this knowledge may contradict his avowal of ignorance in the *Apology* and encourage us to suspect that Socrates has prevaricated and possibly lead us to confer upon him the dubious status of those he interrogates—pretender of wisdom. Upon a close examination of the following dialogues, this tension will be dismissed by evidencing that the optimistic views of death in the *Phaedo* fail to supplant his previous disavowals of knowledge and, furthermore, his conclusions following the trial and imprisonment are the only reasonable views for the condemned man. In brief, the *Phaedo*, like the earlier Platonic dialogues, becomes a text that explicitly shows the importance of Socrates’ unique form of skepticism.

To begin with a bold statement, nowhere in the *Phaedo* does Socrates assert he knows with certainty that death is a good. If this were the case he would run the risk, as Cebes worries, of holding a foolish confidence.⁵ In fact, Socrates repeatedly tempers positive descriptions of death and the afterlife with avowals of ignorance and humility in respect to these divine matters. Even after assuring his companions that he expects to go to good men, he discloses his uncertainty by refusing to admit anything definitively.⁶ While hoping that his current description of death as a migration to a better world will be more persuasive than his previous defence before the Athenians, Socrates caps his remarks with a stunning disclaimer. He says, “But as it is, you may rest assured that I expect to go to good men, though I should not care to assert this positively.”⁷ In tune with the earlier dialogues, Plato carefully presents us with a Socrates who never dogmatically pontificates. Even Socrates’ illustrious portrait of the eschatological economy of the underworld where only the good, i.e. the philosophers, are rewarded with freedom while the evil, i.e. the body-lovers, are punished with the pits of Tarturas, is qualified as a myth or a story which should not be mistaken for an accurate *logos*. As he reminds his captivated companions, “it would not be fitting for a man of sense to maintain that all this is just as I described it.”⁸ Strikingly, from the first to the last page of this dialogue Socrates systematically doubts his actions and behavior, even going so far as to open the dialogue with a rather profound moment of doubt; the infamous testing of the muses⁹

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⁴ This view stands in opposition to Vlastos (1991) who argued that there are two Socrates in the Platonic dialogues; one representing the historical and skeptical Socrates and another adapted by Plato for his own, more systematic philosophy. Vlastos offers ten arguments in favor of the distinction. The third asserts that in the early dialogues Socrates consistently disavows knowledge and claims ignorance but in the middle and later dialogues the philosopher not only seeks but believes he has found reliable, demonstrative knowledge. For Vlastos, the Socrates of the *Phaedo* “is now convinced that both intellectually and morally we would be incomparably better off if we had been spared incarnation, and that now, stuck inside an animal, our fondest hope should be to break away, to fly off never to return.” (1991: 56) This view can also be found in Grube (1935). Grube argued that in the *Phaedo* Plato breaks with his predecessor and concentrates on the development of his metaphysics. “There is good reason to regard the teaching of the *Phaedo*, splendid though it be, as pure intellectualism divorced from life, its final aim being the eternal preservation of the soul in the cold storage of eternally frozen absolute Forms.” (1935:65)

⁵ PLATO, *Phaedo*, 88b.

⁶ PLATO, *Phaedo*, 63c.

⁷ PLATO, *Phaedo*, 63b-c.

⁸ PLATO, *Phaedo*, 114d.
commandment to make music of the normal variety rather than the uncanny harmony brought about in the philosophical life.9

All told, the conscious weakness of Socrates’ claims concerning the good of death becomes evident when he labels his arguments on the immortality of the soul as “charms” (epadein).10 When Cebes asks Socrates how a person might persuade the frightened child within us not to believe that death is a hobgoblin, he frankly advises, “(Y)ou must sing charms to him every day until you charm away his fear.”11 In tune with the arguments of the Apology Socrates still regards the fear of death as childish. This fear still arises from the conceit of identifying death with something evil, here described as the destruction of the soul when leaving the body. Cebes though, unlike the Athenian jurors, wishes to hear Socrates’ apology on death, but as the language of this section indicates, not for the sake of truth or knowledge. Rather, Cebes desires to have Socrates transform his fear, not remove his conceit, charm away his pain, not elucidate the truth. Additionally, Socrates in playful banter has no problem with Cebes identifying him with the “good singer of such charms,” charms which are explicitly therapeutic as they quell the fear of death. More prominently Socrates himself later returns to this language of charms when he insists that the discussion of the immortality of the soul is amiable to the souls who wish to be happy. This belief, unlike its opposite, is thus shown to be more worthwhile due to its beguiling and magnetic character. As he says:

«I think he may properly and worthily believe; for the venture is well worth while; and he ought to repeat such things to himself as if they were magic charms, which is the reason I have lengthening out my story for so long.»12

Alongside the alarming comparison of his proofs to charms, none of his statements concerning the good of death are made with positive epistemological terms. In fact, he does not know anything but always qualifies his new beliefs as a ‘great hope’ (polle elpis).13 While discussing philosophy as a practice unto death, Socrates argues that the lovers of wisdom rather than the body will attain a union with the divine Ideas. He believes it unlikely that those who are impure could mix with what is most pure, concluding that the philosophic life offers the best chance of attaining knowledge and happiness. He says:

«Then if this is true, my friend, I have great hopes that when I reach the place I am going, I shall there, if anywhere, attain fully to that which has been my chief object in my past life, so that the journey which is now imposed upon me is begun with great hope; and the like hope exists for every man who thinks that his mind has been purified and made ready.» 14

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9 PLATO, Phaedo, 61a.
10 Cf. PLATO, Charmides 157b.
11 PLATO, Phaedo, 77e.
12 PLATO, Phaedo, 114d.
13 See also Hyland (2004: 8) where he argues that Plato calls them “hopes” in order to avoid formulating a proof of the immortality of the soul in lieu of a “convincing reassurance.” Hyland ultimately believes that Plato has Socrates appeal to Pythagorean beliefs in order to seduce his “weeping” companions into a philosophic dialogue.
14 PLATO, Phaedo, 67b.
Three times the philosopher labels the views as a hope, a hope, however, that is possible for all men who practice philosophy. He tempts the virtuous to believe a reward awaits them in the afterlife, the hope of obtaining true knowledge. To emphasize, Socrates in the *Phaedo* then does not know that death is a good but only has a great hope. Later in the dialogue he says,

«But, Simmias, because of all these things which we have recounted we ought to do our best to acquire virtue and wisdom in life. For the prize is fair and the hope great.»

Here, Socrates comes shockingly close to merely saying it is a safer bet to believe in the existence of the immortality of the soul and a union with the divine than not to believe. Not believing merely stimulates fear while believing temptingly offers the “prize” (*to athlov*) of a union with the divine and calms the heart of a man awaiting execution. As he does in the *Meno*, with the theory of recollection, Socrates admits that his narrative simply ameliorates the inquirer by stimulating inquiry rather than stymieing it. Furthermore, with regards to death being a good, its alternatives, e.g. death as destruction of the soul that renders all inquiry in life meaningless, simply hinder philosophical activity in the same manner as the eristic paradox in the *Meno* potentially obstructs inquiry. Taking this into consideration with the arguments of *Protagoras*, specifically the argument that no one willingly chooses that which they know to be more of an evil, it becomes possible that beliefs like the theory of recollection and that death is a good are held since they at least stimulate the recognition of value in the philosophic life. Socrates admits:

«I shall not be eager to make what I say seem true to my hearers, except as a secondary matter, but shall be very eager to make myself believe it. For see, my friend, how selfish my attitude is. If what I say is true, I am the gainer by believing it; and if there be nothing for me after death, at any rate I shall not be burdensome to my friends by my lamentations in these last moments».17

Like his skeptical stance regarding death in the *Apology*, here in this revealing passage of the *Phaedo* Socrates conclusively acknowledges the uncertainty of his “new” positive beliefs. Appealing to both his own egoism and his follower’s grief, Socrates is not so much concerned with proving the good in death as favoring believing over not believing since value emerges in such an act.

To understand Socrates’ association with “valuable” beliefs more fully, consider Socrates’ striking refusal to assert positively his belief that all particular instantiations of beauty arise from the presence (*parousia*) or communion with absolute beauty. Appealing not to certainty or even truth, but seemingly to probability, Socrates admits that such confidence in absolutes arises because it is “the safest answer [he] can give to [himself].”

It may also be interesting to note a striking parallel between Socrates here in the *Phaedo* and Cephalus’ beliefs about when elderly men confront death in the first book of the *Republic* where he says, “For a beautiful saying it is, Socrates, of the poet that when a man lives out his days in justice and piety ‘sweet companion with him, to cheer his heart and nurse his old age, accompanieth, Hope, who chiefly ruleth the changeful mind of mortals.’ That is a fine and admirable saying.” (331a) In other words, despite their variance, both Socrates and Cephalus agree that for the virtuous, there is much to be hoped for in the afterlife.

17 PLATO, *Phaedo*, 114c.
16 PLATO, *Phaedo*, 91a-b.
Nevertheless, regardless of only being the “safest answer,” rather than the most certain, Socrates passionately cleaves to it. In the end, Socrates avoids epistemological optimism and safely backpedals to such statements as, “I hold simply and plainly and perhaps foolishly to this [...]”18 To be sure though, when Socrates identifies the belief in absolutes with the “safest answer” this demarcation arises not from the fact that it is the most probable solution to how beautiful things are beautiful. The belief in the Ideas is not the “safest” because he calculates or measures the evidence for their existence beside their nonexistence. Socrates has no knowledge of the odds, no knowledge of such measures, with regard to this belief. Rather, the belief in absolute beauty is safest because, unlike the opposing belief which denies the existence of beauty itself, such confidence in Ideas is more valuable. In other words, such beliefs support or justify philosophical inquiry insofar as realities like absolute beauty become causes by which the activity of dialectic gains meaning or purpose. In this manner, such realities become not only the formal cause of particular things, but also the end for which dialectic strives; the teleological cause of the desire to know, i.e. philosophy. Here, recall that Socrates’ position on the existence of absolute beauty follows from his rejection of the anti-teleological philosophy of Anaxagoras. Unlike ones “who give no thought to the good, which must embrace and hold together all things,”19 Socrates demands that a proper casual explanation address the now familiar question ‘for what good is this.’ In short the belief in absolute beauty and similar causes is “safest” because it assumes value, assumes existence rather than non-existence, meaning rather than absurdity.

Ultimately, the value of particular beliefs and the importance of trust and hope in philosophical argument, versus Socrates’ dogmatically possessing epistemological certainty, also takes center stage once Cebes and Simmias muster the courage to question Socrates’ “great hope” regarding the immortality of the soul. First recall that Socrates, coyly suspicious of his friends’ silence, opens the doors to the value of doubting and skepticism himself when he encourages Cebes and Simmias to speak up. He flatly admits that “[t]here are still many subjects for doubt and many points open to attack, if anyone cares to discuss these matters thoroughly.”20 Here Socrates once again acknowledges that his arguments are not exhausted; there will always be points of contention. For Socrates though, this contention does not reduce the value of the proposition but opens up the possibility of discovering more, of elucidating the argument more clearly. All told, what matters to Socrates is that the boys muster up the courage to continue the discussion and cast off their moral sciolism with regard to the identification of his death with something to be mourned.

Seizing the chance to unmask their unwitting conceit, Socrates compares Simmias and Cebe to the masses who mistakenly think that the swans sing before they die out of sorrow rather than joy. Famously, Socrates compares himself to these swans, arguing that they do not lament their impending death but sing out of a prophetic hope, an intuition of the good to come. Analogously, for Socrates, to sing such swan songs, to make the music he was commanded to write, he must join with others and examine his “great hope” rather than simply expound it. In fact this valuable/hopeful skepticism continues on once Cebe and Simmias have voiced their concerns and Socrates warns them that their doubts

18 PLATO, Phaedo, 100d.
19 PLATO, Phaedo 99c.
20 PLATO, Phaedo 84c.
should not lead them to become misologists or haters of argument. As most know, Socrates compares the misologist to the misanthrope who believes that all men are frauds, that regardless of seeming faultless one will always discover the depravity of every individual. Similarly the misologist is one who recognizes that all arguments can be refuted and consequently refuses to trust all assertions. Here Socrates warns that just because an argument can be questioned, just because people have faults, the merit of the argument or person may still be there. In short, all meaningful philosophical activity must begin with a simple trust or, as is the case with immortality of the soul, a “great hope” but a trust or hope that does not ignore or cover over the faults of arguments but, as Socrates demands, “eagerly and manfully” attempts to overcome such nihilistic/misanthropic attitudes.

So, to be certain, when Socrates speaks of having a “great hope” with regards to the good of death, he is not placing a mere bet or simply choosing the lesser evil. Socrates is not Pascal and there is no real wager. To show further that he is not, it shall prove useful to turn to the *Apology* where the language of hope first appears. After being sentenced to the death penalty, Socrates chastises his jurors for believing that death is an evil and, moreover, proceeds to test the validity of this belief. As many know, Socrates often tests in the early dialogues the claims of his interlocutors by arguing for the possibility of an opposing view. Once his interlocutor accepts its likelihood, Socrates points to their inconsistency and exposes their ignorance. Employing this method in his defence speech, Socrates intends on exposing the jurors’ conceit to knowledge in thinking that death is an evil by asking if there may be good reason to “hope that it is a good thing.”

Poignantly, as in the *Phaedo*, the possibilities that Socrates enumerates during his defence are explicitly deemed “good reasons to hope,” not proofs. The reasons for accepting this hope in the *Apology* rely on his description of death as one of two things, a virtual nothingness or a migration to the underworld. Socrates demonstrates that either option would be a gain because unconsciousness would be like a dreamless sleep and a migration offers him the chance to practice philosophy on historical figures renowned for their great wisdom, such as King Minos or Homer. Death becomes a refuge, the only safe place to question and seek virtue. Thus Socrates’ hope relies not on a bet between death as a good or an evil but becomes the only option for the philosopher who understands that the unexamined life is not worth living. Refusing to live without philosophy, like the analogy of a man who loses a lover in the *Phaedo*, Socrates can only hope for a reunion in the afterlife. While uncertain of a reunion, he must remain hopeful since to do otherwise would deny him the possibility of happiness, i.e. he would be pursuing the known evil, the unexamined life. Insisting there is no reason to live if there is nothing to profit from it, Socrates casually approaches his death with a value-laden

\[21\] PLATO, *Apology*, 40c. For an interesting article on the possibility that death is a good in the *Apology* see Roochnik (1985:212-220).


\[24\] PLATO, *Phaedo*, 116e. Here Vlastos notes that this and the previous discussion in 115aff are examples of Plato re-inserting the early depiction of Socrates. I question the ease with which Vlastos allows Plato to oscillate from one persona into another. Vlastos must maintain that the *Phaedo* follows the strict categories of the middle and later depictions of Socrates in order to prove that Plato no longer relies on the historical
belief or hope. Although the strength of this hope fails to increase his certainty it emphasizes the possibility of happiness only attainable in the examined life or, when this is denied, death.25

To be sure though, in the Phaedo, unlike lovers who blindly hope for reunion with their beloved in the afterlife, Socrates recognizes that one must possess understanding of the things for which one hopes. Thus the Phaedo strikingly becomes the dialogue for examining his great hopes first expressed in the Apology. Recall that in the Apology Socrates advances the two positive accounts of death, death as a dreamless sleep or a migration, in order to refute the most common pretence to wisdom, the fear of death. In his defence Socrates does not intend to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the idea that death may be a good but instead intends to expose mass ignorance. The Phaedo then in many ways picks up where the Apology left off as Socrates now has the time and intention to test these claims. With the help of his disciples, together, they carefully examine the problems surrounding positive views of death and, strikingly, the theories examined in the Phaedo merely offer the negative corollaries of death described as either a dreamless sleep or migration in the Apology. First, when Cebes, Phaedo and Simmias ask questions about the soul and the possibility of its destruction or its harmony with the body, they implicitly criticize Socrates’ assertion that a virtual nothingness would be a good. Unconsciousness suggests the destruction of the soul and would consequently be something fearful.26 Second, the discussion concerning whether the soul may be harmed through repeated births27 and, unlike the picture of Hades during his defence speech,28 the description of the afterlife as possibly cruel, deny Socrates’ premise in the Apology that a migration would be good for all people in all circumstances. Ultimately though, through a bewitching number of charming arguments Socrates attempts to encourage his companions to dismiss their fear and instead hope that death is a great good.

Ultimately, in Socrates’ constant attempt to promote the dismissal of fear in his companions, the Phaedo also becomes an excellent resource for understanding the virtue of courage in both the early and middle dialogues. In other words, despite its refutation as

Socrates. Thus, Vlastos constantly guards against all depictions of the earlier Socrates or his disavowals of knowledge in middle or later dialogues and usually dismisses their appearance. (1991: 33 n.44)

Furthermore, it might be interesting to recall Socrates’ language in the divided line of the Republic where faith or pistis is the second step toward knowledge. Without going into detail concerning the workings of this complicated system, we can see here how having hope might be part of such faith, such believing. Yet this is not a blind faith but a necessary motivating factor in propelling one toward the acquisition of true understanding and divine contemplation. In other words, one who does not hope, who merely questions for the sake of questioning, who denies the existence of absolutes because they do not know them with certainty, does not even give themselves the opportunity to travel the path toward the sun. One who does not have a hope to discover anything, one who argues that there is nothing to be discovered, this inquirer does not travel anywhere but remains where he is, content with what it is he thinks he knows. Rather, one must make assumptions and make them with good faith, insofar as this act compels examination and dialogue. Strikingly, pistis in the Republic is not a mere psychological magician fighting against the intellect, but itself a shade of the good, an intuition that must be held onto if one ever wishes to ascend to the Intelligible realm. In other words, belief and hope, while a seemingly small and trifle part of human understanding, are in fact part and parcel of the movement toward divine contemplation. Understood thusly, Socrates’ great hopes and valuable beliefs before his own death in the Phaedo may in fact be part of the necessary epistemological pathway prior to union with the divine Forms.

25 PLATO, Phaedo, 88b.
26 PLATO, Phaedo, 87c-88c.
27 PLATO, Phaedo, 81d-3.
a definition of courage in the *Laches*, Socrates via his unique skepticism in the *Apology* and the *Phaedo* does know something, he seems to know “what is to be feared and not feared.” To understand this, there is an irony in both Socrates defence speech before the Athenians and its doppelganger in the *Phaedo* as both dialogues echo many of the definitions of courage advanced not only in the *Laches* but also the *Protagoras*. Consider first the *Apology*, where Socrates ultimately appeals to the intellectualist definition of courage when he emphasizes that the unexamined life is what he dreads. This is the expected evil, not death. He concludes:

«I shall never fear or avoid those things concerning which I do not know whether they are good or bad rather than those which I know are bad.»

Not only emphasizing his commitment to the good throughout the *Apology*, Socrates’ actions resemble even Laches’ first definition of bravery advanced in the dialogue named after him. Like a good foot soldier, men always station themselves at what they consider the good. In other words the “perceived good” acts like a commander overriding all other considerations. In the *Phaedo* a similar thought is expressed when Cebes says that “philosophers ought to be ready and willing to die.” Pleased at such expressions of commitment, Socrates responds by connecting the virtue of courage to both his lack of fear before death and his recognized fear of the unexamined life when he says:

«[...] I think a man who has really spent his life in philosophy is naturally of good courage when he is to die, and [has] strong hopes that when he is dead he will attain the greatest blessings in that other land.»

Here we see that “the great hope” versus a possession of certainty in the immortality of the soul stimulates the virtue of courage via the commitment to the good. Ultimately, and perhaps paradoxically, the recognition of ignorance grounds his knowledge of “what is to be dreaded and feared” as the only thing to be feared is the life devoid of such value, a life that fails to question for what good all this is. Without that perplexity and that concurrent question for what good, the good would not come to be in one’s life. It would always remain something aloof, rather than immanent. In contrast when we have the courage to hold such hopes, recognizing the value in the life attempting to overcome such ignorance, we ultimately embody the good that we are directed toward. Such hope in the good of death then is to harmonize fully one’s faith in the absolute good of it all. In other words, if both Socrates’ judges and his companions in his cell examined their lives and recognized their ignorance, their own conceits to knowledge regarding Socrates’ demise, they too might possess such “great hopes,” i.e. see the value of Socrates’ life and death even without the charming *logos* of the immortality of the soul.

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29 PLATO, *Phaedo* 63e-64a.

27 Think also of the various times when Socrates implores his companions to be brave or not to fear. Cf. *Euthydemus* 275c where Socrates emphasizes that Cleinias remain brave for the sake of acquiring virtue. Later Socrates perceives that the youth is becoming fearful of inquiring more with the sophist and says that this would be shameful if the boy lost heart. 277d Also Socrates says he is ready to risk putting himself in the hands of the sophists if “only he must make me good.” (285c) In other words, that their intent is to inquire for the sake of a value-laden inquiry rather than for winning or making sport.
Ultimately, as we have come to suspect, the *Phaedo*, then, may not be the best dialogue to use when wishing to defend Socrates’ optimism towards death, an optimism which would lead us to suspect that he has gained some sort of irrefutable, certain knowledge. This dialogue above all merely emphasizes his commitment to examination and constant doubt on what merely seems hopeful. This appears to be the only thing he knows, a knowledge which seems in tune with the earlier aporetic dialogues. Nevertheless, to be sure, there is a dialogue which may throw a firmer wrench into this skeptical portrait of Socrates’ views on death as a much stronger optimism towards the afterlife is present in the *Gorgias*, an arguably earlier dialogue than the *Phaedo*. Here, unlike both the *Apology* and the *Phaedo*, Socrates repeatedly insists that his grand narrative of the judgment of souls is “an actual account” that he “offers as the truth.” Carefully avoiding all uncertainty and appeals to doubt, Socrates adheres to traditional Homeric mythology and explains how souls retain the scars of misdeeds, helping the great judges decide their appropriate punishment or reward for virtue and vice.

Due to Socrates’ lack of doubt regarding this myth of the afterlife, some argue that this optimism is an interjection of Plato’s development and that, while being an early dialogue, it must be closer to the transitional period in which Plato begins to diverge into a more imaginative and metaphorical style characteristic of dialogues like the *Symposium*. While this may be true, a couple of things are worth noting that might allow for continuity between all three dialogues. First, after an eerie foreshadowing of his impending condemnation, Socrates tells Callicles that if he were ever to be prosecuted for his philosophical deeds he would not fear death so long as he never flattered the jurors but continued awakening them to what is better. Here, as he does in all the dialogues, Socrates underscores his lack of fear of death, but unlike the *Apology* and the *Phaedo* he does not do this by offering the possibility of death as a dreamless sleep or the destruction of the soul because his intention is not to remove the fear of death. He states simply that the fear is “utterly irrational and unmanly.” In the *Gorgias* Socrates does not explain or attempt to prove its absurdity because the intent of this account is to transform the common opinion of the good. By arguing that men must examine and care for their souls Socrates’ narrative of the afterlife aims at compelling his listeners to act in such a way as to ensure human happiness. If anything, the grand narrative implies that death is something to be feared by the vicious who may hope for genuine happiness neither in life nor death as their particular form of ignorance precludes them from choosing appropriately. Most have not lived the life of contemplation and have not become discerning; therefore, they are unable to examine and consequently choose between apparent goods and the truly good. The doubly ignorant rashly choose what seems honorable, prestigious and pleasurable, while others who have lived more thoughtful lives choose wisely, caring not for what seems to be good. These men, while not philosophers, are committed to careful examination and are in many senses rewarded with happy or contented lives.

Second, during the narrative, Socrates says that the point of the story is to “draw some such moral [... ],” not prove its accuracy. In fact he qualifies the account with

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31 PLATO, *Gorgias* 523a.
33 PLATO, *Gorgias* 527c7.
34 PLATO, *Gorgias* 524b2.
relative statements like “it seems to me” and the weak epistemic claim, “this is what I have heard and believe,” not the strong, cognitive claim of certain knowledge. Once Socrates finishes the narrative, he fully declares that the moral “doing wrong is to be more carefully shunned than suffering it” cannot be disproved. He cleverly assigns the truth value not to the narrative, which they are fully allowed to dislike, but to its message. In other words, the burden of proof rests on Socrates’ assertion that men must accept the value of caring for their actions and searching for better answers, not the actuality of the grand narrative.

In conclusion, Socrates, like all of his interlocutors before him, does indeed assert bold theories concerning death and the afterlife in the *Phaedo* and even the *Gorgias*. Yet, in this dialogue he does not shrink from examining his beliefs and the possibility of refutation. Particularly, in the hours before his death, he willingly risks the destruction of his particular “hope” in the immortality of the soul by encouraging Cebes and Simmias to examine his propositions and overcome their reticence “for fear it may be disagreeable to [Socrates] in [his] present misfortune.” Consistent to the end, Socrates demands that they must treat him as they always did, unless they consider him “more churlish now than [he] used to be.” Since his statements are not dogmas to be adopted uncritically, one must, as Socrates tells Cebes, *ask questions to be a man.* He scrutinizes the possibility of a beneficial death more seriously than he did in the *Apology* and the *Gorgias* because one must never trust an argument or intuition without sufficiently questioning or examining it, as this questioning itself reveals the value or the good one seeks. Ultimately, as we saw, this commitment to skeptical inquiry leads Socrates to warn Phaedo about the dangers of becoming a misologist, a hater of arguments, who like misanthropes trust too soon and are duped by false pretence. In contrast to such blind trust, the hope Socrates invokes during his defence becomes a statement to be tested and corroborated, and thus a catalyst for discovery rather than a valueless rejection of all arguments, beliefs or in Socratic terms “hopes.” In his prison cell Socrates tests the propositions in the *Apology* that death may be a good and in the *Phaedo* these arguments affirm Socrates’ hope, making it the more valuable belief. Thus since no man willing chooses evil, a valueless not knowing, over the good, the value-laden hope regardless of not-knowing, Socrates commits himself to the “great perhaps” of the immortality of the soul. Yet, like the swans who sing most beautifully prior to their death so too the

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*PLATO, Gorgias 524b3.*
*PLATO, Gorgias 524a9.*
*PLATO, Gorgias 527b3.*
*PLATO, Gorgias 527a4. Compare this also to the structure of the Republic where the myth of Er becomes the final argument against the common belief that the life of injustice, shrouded in seeming justice, is better than true justice.*
*PLATO, Phaedo, 84d.*
*PLATO, Phaedo, 84e.*
*PLATO, Phaedo, 103a. See Vlastos (1991: 46ff) where in his tenth proof of Plato’s two separate and incomparable Socrates, Vlastos relies on the philosopher’s dismissal of the elenchos in favor of hypothetical arguments whose premises must be agreed upon but no longer examined. Socrates’ repeated demands for questioning his premise, such as the above, undermine such distinctions.*
*PLATO, Phaedo, 89d-90b.*
*See also Shorey (1938:67-68) where he writes on the inheritance of this “great hope” in the Platonic traditions.*
*PLATO, Phaedo, 84e-85b.*
philosopher applies his famous method of self-refutation and examines a claim to wisdom, which just so happens to be his own, with more skill and eloquence than ever before, compelling his listeners to examine and accept the hopeful but inexhaustible premise that his death is a good.