

## ON THE USES AND ABUSES OF ESCHATOLOGY FOR LIFE

### *Sobre los usos y abusos de la escatología para la vida*

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of the concluding myth of the *Phaedo* in the context of the dialogue as a whole, arguing that the myth's exploration of the relationship between action, condition of soul and form of life provides valuable information about Plato's conception of the kind of political environment necessary for human flourishing. It identifies three features of the myth essential to this exploration: its self-critical construction of the perspective of the makers of this myth, its focus on the conditions under which violent deeds are committed and its envisaging of the form of human community necessary for the expiation of such deeds.

*Keywords:* Plato, *Phaedo*, eschatology, myth.

#### RESUMEN

El artículo examina el papel del mito final del *Fedón* dentro del contexto de la totalidad del diálogo y argumenta que la exploración que hace el mito de la relación entre acción, condición del alma y forma de vida brinda importante información acerca de la concepción platónica del tipo de entorno político que favorece el florecimiento del ser humano. Identifica tres rasgos del mito que son esenciales para dicha exploración: su construcción autocrítica de la perspectiva de los creadores del mito, su enfoque en las condiciones en las que se cometen actos violentos y su visión de una forma de comunidad humana necesaria para la expiación de tales actos.

*Palabras clave:* Platón, *Fedón*, escatología, mito.

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For all of the current scholarly debate surrounding Plato's use of myth,<sup>1</sup> its philosophical import,<sup>2</sup> and the analyses of particular myths,<sup>3</sup> David Sedley's recent observation rings true: "It remains the case that Plato's myths, for all the interest they have attracted, are far too rarely used in the interpretation of the dialogues to which they belong." (51) A more integrative approach to Plato's myths, one which seeks to understand them in the context of the animating questions of the dialogues in which they appear and to illuminate the sinews Plato constructs to connect the myths with the body of the dialogue, would avoid the danger of hypostatizing some elements of the dialogues while overlooking the critical appropriation of culturally embedded images and concepts with which these dialogues are filled. Indeed, if we discern the influence of myth broadly to include not only those passages explicitly called a *μῦθος*, but also the use of mythic imagery, we find the dialogues so permeated by mythic content as to place scholarly consternation about the significance of myth for philosophy already at some remove from Plato's work. At the same time, because Plato's appropriation of myth-telling and mythic imagery is a critical appropriation –because Plato puts his myths to work– discerning their import for him and their role in the dialogues requires sorting out what it is that they do.

Such an approach is particularly important for assessing the meaning and significance of Plato's after-life myths. With a few notable exceptions,<sup>4</sup> the general scholarly tendency has been to treat these myths as regrettable digressions from philosophic argumentation to a variety of more or less problematic stances toward mortality: religious conservatism, mysticism, bad faith, cynical demagoguery.<sup>5</sup> Even those scholars who see these myths as evidence of a tendency to locate the fullest and richest forms to which human life can avail itself in trans- or extra-political ends rarely offer much in the way of

1 See, in particular the pivotal recent studies of Brisson, Morgan, and the collection of essays edited by Cataline Partenie, entitled *Plato's Myths*, along with the earlier studies of J. A. Stewart and P. Putiger.

2 Of which Kathryn Morgan's *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato* is exemplary.

3 Claudia Barrachi's treatment of the myth of Er (2001) is especially thought provoking, as is Alessandra Fussi's 2010.

4 See fn 3 above, as well as Annas' "Plato's Myths of Judgment" (1982) and Sedley's "Theology and Myth in the *Phaedo*" (1991), White's *Myth and Metaphysics in Plato's Phaedo*, Burger's *The Phaedo: A Platonic Labyrinth* and Dorter's study of the *Phaedo*.

5 Popper's critique of Plato is perhaps the most extreme form of this criticism; Annas' description of the myth of Er as a 'vulgarity' and 'painful shock' is often pointed to as representative of a milder form of this trend in scholarship (1981 349).

analyses of the particular myths themselves.<sup>6</sup> Overall, contemporary scholarly attention has tended more toward a focus on the fact that Plato composes after-life myths than on what is actually happening in these myths.

With this paper, I would like to bracket, for a moment, the question of why Plato availed himself to after-life myths in his dialogues and turn instead to look carefully at what is being said and done in these myths. That is, I would like to investigate what mythic after-life tropes allow Plato to do, what use he makes of them, taking the myth of the earth near the conclusion of the *Phaedo* as the specific subject of analysis. I will argue that there are three features of this myth that must be taken into account when assessing its place in the dialogue and that should enter into broader considerations of Plato's use of afterlife imagery. First, the myth of the earth contains a decisively critical orientation, not only to some other depictions of the afterlife, but also to the perspective from which its own depiction emerges. This is to say, the myth includes an account of the mythmakers themselves, one which attributes to them a limited and fragmentary vision of what is. Secondly, whatever form of justice emerges from this myth does so on the basis of a shift from the cultural focus on the anger of the victim to the psychic condition of the 'perpetrator'.<sup>7</sup> The myth seeks to isolate and contain the effects of vicious and violent action to the agent of the deed. Thus, I will argue that the myth presents less a futural theodicy (that is, a vision of justice to come) than a nascent phenomenology of violence (an attempt to consider the uncanny endurance of violent deeds). Finally, the specific focus on the effect of violent deeds is connected to a broader reflection on the community in which these deeds are committed, the social arena in which their effects are manifest and the kind of community necessary for any possible expiation. That is, granting the rather fantastical character of this vision of justice in which vicious deeds are expiated by dwelling in a particular place for a particular time, I will argue that this is a fantasy of community.

This final dimension opens up for consideration the broader political and philosophical efficacy of the after-life myths, and returns

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6 This view, that Plato maintains trans-political ends as the highest human goals, is shared by scholars from quite diverse approaches and backgrounds, see for instance, Bobonich's "Plato's Utopia Recast", Ludwig's essay "Eros in the *Republic*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic* and McNeill's "An Image of the Soul in Speech".

7 For discussions of the decisive role of the anger of the victim in Athenian penal law, see Saunders, Allen, Mackenzie and Konstan. This shift is also operative in Plato's *Apology* as well as his *Laws*, whose model of penal law Saunders describes as coming very close to eradicating the rubric of punishment entirely (178).

us to the question of why Plato might include after-life myths in the dialogues. Over the course of the next few pages I hope to make compelling the merits of approaching this larger question not only by asking whether Plato requires one to posit trans-political ends as the goal toward which a flourishing human life will tend, but also by looking carefully at his sustained consideration of the political and philosophic impact on human life of *positing* extra-political ends. Ultimately, doing so would also require us to reconsider what Plato means by ‘immortality’, a much larger task than can be done within a single paper. I submit that this analysis of the *Phaedo*’s myth of the earth contributes to this task, however, by arguing that its account of the fate of the human soul is an attempt to mark the endurance of psychic effects beyond the life of their ‘agent’; and thus that it develops a vision of the *polis* as housing and memorializing traces of psychic effects and of human political life as defined by the challenge of determining how to act within this arena. That is, the myth treats ‘immortality’ as an idiom by means of which Plato considers the *polis* both in its effects on  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$  and as itself an effect of  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$ ; it provides a lens through which human beings can conceive of the life of their deeds beyond the life of themselves. When viewed in this context, the particular features of this after-life myth suggest that, for Plato, being with others in a community in a manner that is productive of human flourishing (or simply in a manner that is philosophically interesting) requires some sense of the relative endurance of one’s actions; positing extra-political ends to human life provides one means of cultivating this sense. This in turn suggests that the pursuit of these ends is itself a deeply political pursuit.

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The myth of the earth is given as a supplement to the four  $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\iota$  about immortality that structure much of the *Phaedo*. Socrates concludes the fourth account with the observation that it is to the care of the soul that they must turn, “not only for this time in which we call ‘being alive’ goes on, but for time as a whole” (107c).<sup>8</sup> And yet, if his subsequent account is indeed of time as a whole, it is the place in which such time unfolds that is given the greatest attention. The myth about the earth Socrates offers provides an image of the scene of duration, an image of what we might call ‘doing time,’ in which the site of the ‘doing’ is the subject of description. Socrates returns to the mythic context in which the four  $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\iota$  began by first offering a preliminary description of the soul’s journey to Hades (107c-108c), then giving an extended myth of the earth (108d-114c) in which he describes the

8 All citations are taken from the Brann, Kalkavage and Salem.

whole earth (108d-109b) and its various regions (109b-113c), and concluding with an account of the experiences of the souls of the dead under and upon its surface (113d-114c).

Certainly, the myth resumes the valorization of the philosophic life begun early on in the dialogue with Socrates' defense of his cheerfulness in the face of his imminent demise (*Apo.* 63a-69e). Socrates does indeed conclude the myth by observing that such a conception of the afterlife urges confidence in the face of death for those who have led a certain kind of life (*Phd.* 114d-e). However, the account of the fate of philosophic souls hardly exhausts the descriptive possibilities opened up by this passage, nor does it explain the length and detail with which Socrates speculates about the afterlife. Moreover, given Socrates' own uncertainty about the extent to which he resembles the true-born philosopher (*Apo.* 69d),<sup>9</sup> a figure who seems to fare so well in this image of the afterlife, there is reason to wonder why we should impute to this myth any motive other than the one Socrates himself gives, namely that it is good to chant such stories to oneself in confronting one's death.<sup>10</sup> This story unfolds within a haze of fantasy, and the myth's therapeutic function is bound up with its fantastical character. In depicting the hours before Socrates' death, Plato presents a Socrates who allows himself in private conversation with his friends to dwell on a topic he permitted himself only brief mention in his public defense (29a-b and 39e-41e), namely, what might await one beyond death. However, the fantastical character of this passage alone is not grounds for ignoring it. Fantasy lends itself to analysis, and this is a very particular vision whose details merit attention. Moreover, Socrates' conclusion, namely that care for the soul should be one's concern in the course of one's life (*Phd.* 114d-e), emphasizes the this-worldly effects of belief in an immortal soul: such a belief involves a particular stance toward one's mortality and toward the manner of life one attempts to lead.

Socrates' this-worldly orientation is apparent throughout this story, wherein souls accompanied by only their nurture and education (*Phd.* 107d) submit themselves to a justice that is enacted by the

9 I take this uncertainty to be read as sincere because it resonates with other features of the dialogue that distance Socrates from his account of the 'true-born' philosopher, particularly in Socrates' invocation of eagerness, *προθυμία*, a condition that requires the cooperation of soul and body, not their divergence. For more on the role of *προθυμία* in Socrates' defense of his confidence on the face of death, see my "Politics and Psychology in Plato's *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Laws*".

10 "And he should sing, as it were, incantations [*ἐπᾶδειν*] to himself over and over again; and that's just why I've drawn out the story for so long" (*Phd.* 114d); such stories are worth listening to (110b).

manner and duration of their dwelling upon an earth outfitted with regions appropriate to them. Indeed, the myth's emphasis on place sharpens the focus on the manner and conditions in which human lives are lived in community with one another.<sup>11</sup> Socrates produces here a sustained meditation on the relationship between human action, condition of soul and quality of life. Part cosmology, part anthropology, Socrates' myth of the earth describes an environment resplendent with a variety of communities and a variety of means for expiating actions. It is grounded in offering a description of human dwelling as the site in which justice is enacted, violent deeds are expiated and souls are perpetually re-absorbed and digested or quarantined. It provides a vision of human life that takes seriously the burden of describing the effects of action on the condition of one's soul and the quality of one's life. This character is most clearly seen in the two accounts of the fate of souls in Hades that bookend the myth.

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The myth of the earth is introduced with a re-telling of what is said about the soul's fate in Hades, a re-telling whose emphasis on the variety of souls results in a critique of Aeschylus's character Telephus, who claimed the journey to Hades was simple.<sup>12</sup> Instead, states Socrates, taking as evidence "the rites and lawful ceremonies practiced here" (*Phd.* 108a), the ways to Hades are many.<sup>13</sup> As the story unfolds, the variety of paths available to souls provides one way in

11 In responding to Hackforth's characterization of the myth of the earth as a presentation of the immaterial in material form (186), Dorter (165) observes that it is rather more the case that the myth presents an image of the life of the soul while connected to the body, thereby presenting, "the timeless in temporal form, or the implicit present in an explicit future". Ahrendorf offers a similar account of the myth as more concerned with this-worldly affairs than with other-worldly affairs (193). I am deeply sympathetic to both these readings. My point is simply that the myth's presentation of what Dorter calls the 'implicit present' occurs not primarily through a discussion of time but through an account of place.

12 W. D. Geddes maintains that this passage is an allusion to the ritual sacrifice to Hecate that was made at crossroads (142), but see Dorter's response to Geddes (170).

13 For a discussion of the mythic tradition from which Plato is drawing here, see Edmunds' *Myths of the Underworld Journey* (188-90). By citing as evidence particular practices Plato signals that Socrates' criticism of Telephus does not involve a complete rejection of religious practice, but neither does it simply affirm this practice. We have here an example of Plato's critical appropriation. It is as though he is saying, insofar as you participate in these rites, you are already committed to the belief that the ways to Hades are many. And what is behind this claim is the notion that not all fates in Hades are the same. Socrates takes this to mean that there are real differences between conditions of soul and that these differences are at least in part a function of one's actions.

which differences between souls can be described and illustrates both their need for a guide and the wretchedness of those souls who, on account of their viciousness, are bereft of guidance (108a). The critical tenor of Socrates' re-telling is maintained throughout this initial exchange, which culminates in Socrates drawing into question not only what has been said about the soul's journey in Hades but what has been said about the earth itself: "And many and wondrous are the earth's regions, and earth itself is neither of the sort nor the size it's held to be in the opinion of those who usually speak about earth, as I've been persuaded by somebody" (108c). Socrates' corrective engagement with poetic and 'scientific' traditions about the soul's journey to Hades and about the size and constitution of the earth serves to underscore that critical engagement he has maintained throughout the four λόγοι and also indicates that the realm of myth is not a placid telling of accepted doctrine but an agonistic battle for authority.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Socrates' return to myth is not a move from dialectical engagement to uncontested territory.

Moreover, Socrates' myth of the earth is not merely one version of an account of earth that would vie with others; it is not simply a myth about the earth at all, but a description of the very perspective from which he and his interlocutors have been speaking about the earth, the soul and body, and the fates that await them. The myth of the true earth offers, among other things, a commentary on perspective itself. The myth creates an image of the earth that incorporates, in a decisively critical manner, the mythmakers themselves: Socrates and his interlocutors are likened to residents of the earth's hollows who mistake their dwelling for the surface of the earth (*Phd.* 109c-d). Thus, this myth includes a self-description which serves as an acknowledgment of blurred vision and as a provocation to correct this vision.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, according to Socrates, he and his interlocutors have been operating with an impoverished view and understanding, they are guilty of mistaking their own experience for how things really are; Socrates' repeated assertions that he would not insist upon the truth of the tale he is telling needs to be read in light of the depiction he has given of his own fragmentary perspective (108d, 114d).

14 For a helpful account of the agonistic dimension of myth-telling, see Edmunds' introduction to his study of Greek conceptions of the afterlife (1-28).

15 Part of the significance of this passage is the degree to which it calls into question and submits for critical assessment all that Socrates and his interlocutors have discussed and agreed upon throughout the dialogue. It emphasizes the need for repeated and consistent examination of these accounts, as Socrates himself suggests (*Phd.* 106b and 114d-e).

Were we tempted to wonder how Socrates has been afforded this purchase on his own perspective, this viewing of his own place, we would have to recall that Socrates is using a vocabulary that has already been made available to him by a long tradition of myths. The variety and plasticity of traditional mythic stories provides Socrates with the very means of critiquing this tradition, and, moreover, allows Socrates to make an image of himself. Plato thus utilizes the language of myth to critique not only other myths but to critique the myth-makers themselves. The *Phaedo*'s play with a number of afterlife themes results in a self-critiquing myth, a dialectical mythology.<sup>16</sup>

The description of the earth that is produced from this appropriation of poetic language is striking in its fecund and self-possessed complexity. In fact, the true earth Socrates describes teems with the variant and the plural. We will pick up with Socrates' initial account of what happens to souls.

According to Socrates, all souls are led by the δαίμων that was assigned to them in life to a region where the dead, who have been collected together and submit themselves to justice, begin their journey. Because there are a variety of paths or ways to take, a guide is necessary for each soul to transport that soul "There" (presumably to Hades and to the specific region of Hades that correspond to them), where the soul encounters and undergoes what it must encounter and undergo, "for the needed time." Once this period of time has elapsed another guide returns the soul "here," "over the course of many –and long– circuits of time" (*Phd.* 108b). Socrates is quite clear from the start of this account what it is designed to illustrate: Because the soul is deathless and thus death is not "freedom from time as a whole" (which would be a comfort to "bad men" 107c), there is the greatest need to care for the soul and to seek the only refuge and safety available, namely that attained by becoming as good and thoughtful as possible. Such conditions of soul can provide a refuge because soul goes into Hades, "with nothing else except her nurture and education [τῆς παιδείας τε καὶ τροφῆς]" (107d).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, one's nurture and education will help determine the kind of journey one undergoes. The soul that is both "orderly and thoughtful" follows along and isn't ignorant of what has happened to it, namely, that it has been separated from body. The body-loving and body-like soul (Socrates explicitly

16 For a more detailed discussion of the dialogic context in which this self-critical dimension of the *Phaedo* myth emerges, see Brill "The Geography of Finitude" (5-23).

17 Note the resonance with the account of soul's judgment in *Gorgias*, in which differences of body, wealth and family are not treated as relevant to the judiciary process, whereas differences of region are (524a).



calls attention to the fact that this is the soul he described previously) remains for a long time fluttering around the body, and only goes off to make the journey to Hades resistant and suffering, led away by its δαίμων. Of the souls that have arrived at the staging ground for their journey to Hades, those who are impure and have done impure things are shunned by the other souls who want neither to journey with nor guide them. Such a soul, “wanders around all by herself, lost in a state of total perplexity, until certain periods of time have passed, and, once they’re over, she’s carried under pain of necessity to the dwelling that is fitting for her” (108c).<sup>18</sup>

This preliminary account of the soul’s journey to Hades operates by way of a logic of containment that connects deed with agent, a logic opened with the observation that the roads to Hades are many. This is the case because different souls have different fates allotted to them in the basis of the condition in which they ‘enter’ Hades that is, the condition they are in at the time of death. Thus, a detail of landscape provides the means for indicating differences of psychic condition. Accompanied by their nurture and education, souls are submitted to a fate that belongs to them alone. Led by guides that have been assigned to them, to a path that is their own (later we learn that this includes traveling on a vehicle reserved for them, *Phd.* 113d), they embark on a journey that will take them to their place of residence for a fixed amount of time. In containing the expiation of the deed to the treatment undergone by the soul of the agent, Socrates’ tale strives to avoid a traditionally tragic context, namely, the visitation of unexpiated wrongs and their affects upon generation after generation of the agent of the deed. Socrates’ tale seeks to eliminate the possibility of unexpiated deeds by maintaining the connection between deed and agent, by presenting death as a landscape and expiation as a function of residence. However, that souls are accompanied by their nurture and education serves as a sign that action alone is not the sole determinant of condition of soul. The effects of other people and institutions are also worn on the ψυχή, so to speak, and the accompaniment of nurture and education gesture toward the effects on the soul of extra-individual institutions, family and community. In these accompaniments, the *polis* looms large.

This logic of containment is complemented by a system of distinctions by means of which souls are distinguished on the basis of their purity and impurity and allotted fates according to these conditions. The distinction between pure (orderly and thoughtful)

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18 Notice the conjunction of confusion, wandering, resistance, force, necessity and isolation.

souls and impure (filled with desire for the body) souls will eventually mutate into a more complex set of distinctions with at least four types: middling souls, corrupt but curable souls, corrupt and incurable souls, and just or holy souls. By the end of the passage, this complex typology is collapsed back into two kinds: body-loving and learning-loving (*Phd.* 114e). The differing fates of pure and impure souls are a function of the differences between those souls' knowledge of their own condition: orderly and thoughtful souls are aware that they are separated from the body, and submit themselves to their fates without resistance. Body-loving souls are ignorant of themselves and their status, resist departure from the realm of the living and haunt the resting place of the body. These souls enact the attitude of people who have failed to properly comport themselves toward their own mortality, failed to acknowledge themselves as subject to death. In its account of their ignorance about themselves this description resonates with the description earlier on the dialogue of the lives of those who have body-loving souls—they are unable to grasp being, unable to understand what is really the case (*Apō.* 64c-69e; 80b-84b). Such souls are only carried off to their fate by force and with difficulty (βίᾱ καὶ μόγις) (*Phd.* 108b). When such souls finally arrive in Hades, if they have committed unjust and violent deeds, they are isolated, bereft of companions or guides; filled with perplexity (ἀπορίᾳ) they wander (πλανᾶται) until carried to their proper region, “under pain of necessity [ὕπ’ ἀνάγκης]” (108c). Their ignorance about themselves subjects them to violent compulsion and necessity; their commission of unjust deeds to isolation and wandering. Alternately, the pure and sensible soul journeys with and is led by gods to dwell in a region that is fitting for it (108c), a region containing temples and groves in which the gods dwell, “and their utterances and prophecies and perceptions of the gods and all such forms of intercourse with the gods comes about for them face to face” (111b-c). The conditions under which these souls flourish stand in stark contrast to the automatic processes governed by necessity to which other souls are subject; indeed, Socrates' emphasis on the presence of the gods signifies an exemption from the forces of violence and constraint by means of which necessity acts. After this description of the conditions of the soul's journeys, Socrates turns to give an account of the earth and its regions—the hollows, the surface and the underworld. We will pick up with his description of the underworld.<sup>19</sup>

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19 For a discussion of possible cosmological sources for Socrates' description of the whole earth, see Morrison.

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While the account of the whole earth emphasizes a unified plurality of color and life –Socrates describes it as “a single form of Earth, continuous and dappled” (*Phd.* 110d)– the account of the various regions under the earth describes a world of teeming forces and flows, of pulsions, of pendulums, of breaths and winds, a world of manifold forces. The variety of flows –flows of water, of mud, of air and of fire– interact with force by coiling, by descending and ascending, by seething, by erupting, by rushing. Thus the motion of water, earth, and air under the earth is errant and pendulous, subject to chance and without foundation (111d-112e).<sup>20</sup> It is by these motions that the underworld animates the earth. Surely this identification of the cause of the swinging motion under the earth is as distant as can be from the balance and equipoise, the self-sameness, of the earth when viewed from above and as a whole (108e-109a); nevertheless this very earth includes the foundationless, baseless liquid and is traversed by the very flows it makes possible. Nor is even this motion without some *ὁμοίωσις* –the rivers become like the earth through which they flow– and predictability: when water recedes in one area, it flows into the opposite area. Thus, Socrates’ account of the motions under the earth includes a kinesiology that invokes both chance and self-sameness. The mingling of chance and necessity, the description of foundationless yet predictable motion all serve the imagery of an earth that is a complex whole, one capable of maintaining its equilibrium amidst even the strongest of internal motions. Like the living body itself, the earth’s underworld is a mixture of constancy and inconstancy, errancy and repetition.<sup>21</sup>

In this general milieu of mingling and resemblance, four bodies of water are marked off from one another, at least two of which are distinct because they do not mingle with the others (*Phd.* 113b-c), the rivers Pyriphlegethon and Cocytus. Such an account invites one to compare the motions of the rivers that encircle and run beneath the earth with desire and its workings, which Socrates will describe in the *Republic* as like a stream whose current can be made to flow in a

20 This imagery of a baseless, foundationless flowing and of a motion that partakes of chance, begs comparison with the discussion of *χώρα* in the *Timaeus* as the errant cause, the receptacle of being.

21 Indeed, the very physical, bodily account of the underworld and its circulatory system is made more explicit as Socrates continues his description of the movement of water, earth, and air under the earth: “just as when people breathe, the breath, as it flows, is always breathed out and breathed in, so also there the breath, as it swings along with the liquid, brings about certain dreadful and monstrous winds as it goes in and out” (*Phd.* 112b).

number of directions (485d).<sup>22</sup> And it is with this oblique reference to the pushing and pulling of desire that Socrates returns to the task with which he began his mythic geography, namely, locating the fate of the human soul in and on the earth. Reiterating that all souls, regardless of how they have lived their lives, are gathered together and submit themselves to justice, Socrates offers the following general schema of what happens to souls in Hades. Those souls that led what Socrates describes as ‘middling lives’ can expect the following journey: they travel on foot to Acheron where they encounter rafts “reserved for them” by means of which they arrive at the Acherousian Lake, where, “the soul’s of many who’ve met their end keep arriving, and after staying for certain allotted times –some longer, some shorter– are sent out again into the generation of the living” (*Phd.* 113a). These souls dwell on the lake and, “purified [καθαίρόμενοι] by paying the penalty [διδόντες δίκας] for their unjust deeds” (113d-e) are eventually released, carrying off honors for their good deeds. This presentation of purification as a payment of penalty elides punishment with an alteration of psychic condition. Moreover, Socrates leaves his account of this payment somewhat underdetermined –it seems to consist simply in dwelling in a particular place for a particular period of time. Thus, purification is purchased by taking up residence in a certain environment.

Another category of souls, the incurables, so-called because of the, “magnitude of their misdeeds” are cast into Tartarus, “from which there is no exit” (*Phd.* 113e-114a). Presumably, these souls are incurable because there is no payment possible to return their injustice, no value can be set that would allow for such payment. So excessive are their misdeeds, no calculus exists to calculate their payment, no currency to make such payment.

Those souls who have committed misdeeds that are curable “although great,”<sup>23</sup> a designation presumably made to distinguish between these, the lesser injustices that some of the souls residing on the Acherousian Lake have committed, and the deeds that render their doer incurable, are “of necessity [ἀνάγκη *Phd.* 114a]” rushed into Tartarus. However, for these souls some mechanism of release

22 For a more extensive discussion of the connection between Socrates’ description of the rivers that run beneath the earth and the passions of the soul, see Burger 197-200.

23 The examples Socrates gives here are informative: “for example, those who’ve practiced some violence against father or mother under the influence of anger [ὅτι ὀργῆς] and live out the rest of their lives in repentance, or those who became homicides in some other such way” (*Phd.* 114a). In the *Laws* Plato will create a category of misdeed, homicide in anger (866d-e), which, according to Saunders, was without precedent in Athenian law (225).

has been devised. After residing in Tartarus for a year, they are discharged, the homicides to freezing Cocytus and the parricides and matricides to fiery Pyriphlegethon.<sup>24</sup> The path of these rivers is such that they afford for a brief period of time sufficient proximity to the Acherousian Lake as to allow the souls rushing along them to call out to the souls residing in the Lake, supplicating and entreating those souls against which they have aggressed, with the hopes of persuading them to receive them into the Lake. Those souls who are successful are granted entry into the community of the majority of souls.

As several scholars have noted, the mechanics of redemption presented by this account are dubious.<sup>25</sup> There seems to be no guarantee

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24 On the question of why some souls would be burnt and others frozen, Edmunds notes that it is likely that this distinction plays upon a mythic tradition now lost to us (213), while Burger emphasizes the reference to a variety of experiences made by the names of these rivers, and suggests the effects of the rivers resonates with the effect of these experiences (cf. 197-200).

25 Annas offers a particularly clear discussion of this problem (cf. 1982). She asserts that the cosmological elements of this myth are in tension with the depiction of final judgment in the myth. According to Annas the problem with this tension is that it results in two competing conceptions of punishment. On the one hand, the trope of reincarnation suggests that embodiment is punishment for the possession of a corrupt soul and the myth's claim that only philosophic souls will be allowed to persist in a disembodied state proposes disembodiment as their reward (*Phd.* 114c). On the other hand, the specific character of the earth suggests a form of punishment on the basis of the experiences souls undergo while disembodied. When combined, these two forms of punishment suggest that no matter how thorough the punishment one undergoes while disembodied, all but a very few souls will then undergo that added insult of returning to bodies. Annas sees this somewhat pessimistic view as a mean between the optimistic final judgment scene in the *Gorgias* and the heavier pessimism of the myth of Er in the *Republic*, where very little room is left open for individual souls to change the outcome of their lives. This is a compelling and provocative comparison; however, it does not take into account the work that the description of regions of the earth does, namely, provide yet another means of describing different kinds of souls and emphasizing the variety of forms of viciousness. In the myth of the earth, the theme of reincarnation is alluded to, but is by no means the central theme of the myth. Gallop, like Annas, maintains that what is said in the myth is incompatible with the theme of reincarnation utilized earlier (Gallop 224). However, by my reading, since the main work of the theme of reincarnation was to supply Socrates with some means of distinguishing between kinds of souls, a robust account of reincarnation is no longer needed in the myth of the earth because its work is done instead by a description of regions of the earth. Rather than attributing this difference between accounts of punishment to Plato's pessimism, I suggest that it is a function of a shift in approach to developing a taxonomy of conditions of soul, one which moves from characterizing different psychological conditions as akin to animals to characterizing different psychological conditions on the basis of geographic features.

that the souls against which one has aggressed will even be residing in the Lake at the same time as the aggressing soul is rushing around in its respective river. I would like, however, to draw our attention to the descriptive possibilities this passage provides. I am particularly interested in two features of this discussion. First, the manner in which the geography in this part of the myth provides a way of thinking about action and its effects on the whole. In drawing distinctions between kinds of vicious acts the myth offers a way of considering carefully the effect of certain actions, and a way of describing those effects. By concretizing these effects into places and processes one gets a sense for the effect of the action on the whole community. This is to say, the myth provides resources for considering the effect of human action within the entire arena of human community. Second, I would like to explore the specific possibility for contending with certain unjust actions this section of the myth presents thorough the possible re-absorption of fugitive souls.

With respect to its framing of the effects of human action, the earth's mythic geography offers a way of figuring liminal action, both that which is exemplary and that which is degenerate. Pure and pious souls (the souls of the philosophers) are permitted to dwell on the surface of the earth in the company of gods. The suggestion here is that adopting the manner of life of the philosopher wins one a certain freedom from the circulation between various dwellings and processes that most other souls must undergo. Impure souls whose actions are incurable, that is, of a number and magnitude of injustice as to be incapable of compensating for their effects, are cast into Tartarus with no possibility of release. Thus, on the one hand the extremity of these actions is emphasized; bereft of a means of correcting them, such souls are also exempt from the processes that offer a means of repayment. On the other hand, because even the worst injustices are neither without place nor without some description of them and their effects, the intelligibility of even these actions is assured. The allocation of incurable souls to Tartarus assures the quarantine, and thus the limitation of the effects, of even the most heinous deeds. There is no crime so great that it does not have some corresponding place, some means of describing its effects. Even the prohibition of re-absorption does not render impossible some illustration of the effect of the act – radical isolation. This section of the myth offers a categorization of actions (those that can be re-absorbed and those that cannot), a way of viewing their effect on the whole, and also a way of thinking about how to contend with some of those actions (re-absorption or quarantine).

A second feature of this geography is the mechanism it provides for the digestion of vicious deeds through the re-integration of

fugitive souls into the process most souls undergo. Isolated by their misdeeds both in their journey to Hades<sup>26</sup> and once they have arrived, those who have committed great but curable misdeeds spend a year in Taratarus and then are rushed to either Cocytus or Pyriphlegethon (depending on the kind of misdeed), rivers which Socrates emphasizes do not mix with any others (*Phd.* 113b and c). These souls are literally consumed by the earth and brought into its circulation by their placement in its rushing rivers. The digestion of these souls can go in one of two ways, it seems; either they circulate in perpetuity or they are received into the company of the majority of other souls. The possibility of re-integration is afforded by another geographical feature: the brief proximity to the Lake that each river offers them is the necessary means by which they gain access to the ears of their potential liberators. The geography depicts, and its curious structure enables, a digestion of (a having done with) misdeeds by means of a process whereby the doer is potentially permitted re-entry into normalcy. Denied community with one another by the rushing to which they are subject, these souls focus instead on gaining reception to the Acherousian Lake, and their means for doing so is to supplicate, entreat and persuade those against whom they have aggressed to receive them. It is only if they are successful in doing so that they are released from the rushing river and allowed entry into the Lake and thus eventually back into the circulation to which most souls are subject. We might wonder about this rhetoric for the damned –in what it would consist, what kinds of arguments and claims might be made that would be effective, in what ways it might resemble courtroom rhetoric and in what ways diverge. Socrates' silence on this front makes these questions unanswerable, at least within the context of this text. However, what is striking in all of this is the connection this geography permits between aggressor and aggressed.<sup>27</sup> If part of the purpose of the passage is to give an account of what as required for the expiation of certain deeds and of the condition of the agent of such deeds, then the passage suggests that redemption is made by gaining some access to the victim and attaining some means of persuading the victim to release and receive the agent. The 'time' of the deed

26 The impure do not find fellow travelers or guides, not even, it would seem, among other impure souls, souls with which they are akin. Socrates specifies that the impure soul wanders around alone and perplexed for a set period of time before going on its journey (*Phd.* 108b-c).

27 The assertion of a connection between aggressor and aggressed is not without support in other elements of Greek society, especially in the religious beliefs about the context of impurity that pervades the act of homicide, see Parker. In the *Laws* we will see Plato compose laws that reflect these beliefs.



is the 'time' in which this particular relationship stands. Expiation consists of forgiveness, or, to follow more closely the language of the text, expiation is the attainment of reception, winning the victim's willingness to extend hospitality to the offender. The contingency of expiation places the burden of its accomplishment upon securing a particular form of access and appeal.

We are now in a position to re-integrate this account of the various fates human soul encounter on and in the earth with the account of the earth itself. The language of flow and the emphasis on multiplicity serve as a means for describing varieties of souls, as souls find themselves in particular regions (subject to particular modes of conveyance) by means of their various conditions with respect to virtue and vice. Because souls find themselves in places that correspond to their condition, which is itself determined by their actions, the emphasis on places appropriate to the soul is also an emphasis on the reciprocity between action and environment. The description of what happens to corrupt souls entails a description of the environment that surrounds the corrupted soul. The isolation, confusion and wandering of unjust souls at the start of their journey to Hades (*Phd.* 108a-c), the drowning, freezing and burning of murderous souls while in Hades and the need of these souls to perpetually and perhaps fruitlessly seek forgiveness in order to be liberated from their circumstances (113e-114c), all provide resources for speaking about the conditions of souls in this life as much as in another. Indeed, the myth provides a critical lens through which Socrates and his interlocutors can view their own purchase on the soul. What is won in the myth is the identification of Socrates' and his interlocutors' own perspective; they are put in their place.

This place, the earth as Socrates' myth presents it, encompasses *both* a variety of processes, circuits and locals, some more desirable than others, and the possibility of freedom from process (as figured by the dwellings of the pure, on the surface of the earth and in even more fantastic dwellings). In so describing earth, this myth provides Socrates and his interlocutors with resources for considering the effects of their actions on the community in which they reside in this life, and thus implicitly locates Socrates' claim to care for their souls in the effects such care has for the city. Ultimately, the myth also presents the dream of limiting the effects of vicious deeds and doing so in such a manner that is in accord with, and even a function of, the structure and operation of the whole earth. While, as Brann has noted (18), no cities appear in Socrates' myth of the earth, the myth provides an image of human community that limits viciousness in accord with the cosmos. In so



doing, it presents a provocation to arrive at such a community and to envisage what manner of political life would make this possible.

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