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### Abstract

This paper begins with an examination of the notoriously shoddy proofs for the immortality of the soul that Socrates presents in the *Phaedo*. I first turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer's account of the proofs (as historically situated between science and myth), and then, using evidence from the *Phaedo* itself and a wide sampling of the dialogues, reframe the proofs as a metaphor for the self. With the discussion thus redirected, I look at Jacques Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy" in order to begin to the discussion about the implications of the failed proofs for a new understanding of the Platonic subject (as a subject whose description is always-already failed because of the confines of language). Finally, I apply Slavoj Žižek's critique of Derrida in order to achieve a more nuanced, radical, and complete understanding of the subject being presented in the *Phaedo*—a subject whose incompleteness ("failure") is constitutive and ontological, rather than linguistic and epistemological.

## The Failing of the Self or the Self of Failing? Gadamer, Derrida, Žižek, and the *Phaedo*

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### Abstract

This paper begins with an examination of the notoriously shoddy proofs for the immortality of the soul that Socrates presents in the *Phaedo*. I first turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer's account of the proofs (as historically situated between science and myth), and then, using evidence from the *Phaedo* itself and a wide sampling of the dialogues, reframe the proofs as a metaphor for the self. With the discussion thus redirected, I look at Jacques Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy" in order to begin to the discussion about the implications of the failed proofs for a new understanding of the Platonic subject (as a subject whose description is always-already failed because of the confines of language). Finally, I apply Slavoj Žižek's critique of Derrida in order to achieve a more nuanced, radical, and complete understanding of the subject being presented in the *Phaedo*—a subject whose incompleteness ("failure") is constitutive and ontological, rather than linguistic and epistemological.

That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at. When he was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care if there was a word for it or not. I knew that fear was invented by someone that had never had the fear; pride, who had never had the pride...[Anse] had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was just like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn't need a word for that anymore.  
--Addie Bundren, in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*

The Platonic dialogues are inarguably one of the key foundations of Western thought. Unfortunately, they are also frequently some of the most egregiously misread texts in the Western canon. In order to appreciate the dialogues in all their nuance and insight, we must first abandon any expectation of being able to approach and read them as treatises; they are, first and foremost, plays, and, as such, require careful reading—often between the lines. For example, Socrates' (seemingly) contrary descriptions of philosophy (as both death-bound and erotic) or of how he became interested in philosophy need not be read strictly as contradictory. Instead, the context of these

comments, their intended impact, and the interlocutor to whom they are being delivered play important parts in decoding the philosophical message being conveyed and its implications.

The dramatic character of the dialogues presents special challenges, but often elucidate complex problems very clearly when they are approached correctly (as dialogues and not as treatises or proofs). Plato's *Phaedo* is no exception; the tragic beauty of Socrates in the dialogue and the drama of the situation help establish it as "one of the most marvelous and significant writings in all Greek philosophy" (Gadamer 21). Yet we cannot help but notice that the proofs for the immortality of the soul that Socrates gives in the dialogue are, logically speaking, questionable at best. Given that Socrates provides much stronger proofs elsewhere in the dialogues and that in the text he suggests that his goal is to dispel the childish fears of the interlocutors (in other words, not to prove incontrovertibly that the soul is immortal), we should risk reexamining the role that the proofs play.

In order to this, I will examine three philosophers—Hans-George Gadamer, Jacques Derrida, and Slavoj Žižek—to see how we might appropriate their interpretations into a more accurate understanding of the *Phaedo*. I should also note that throughout the paper, almost by necessity, parallels will be drawn to the work and thought of Jacques Lacan, though his theories will not be incorporated directly into my project. This is helpful because Lacan's psychoanalytic theory is the explicit background of Žižek's thought and the implicit language of Derrida's.

### Gadamer and the failed proofs

Let us begin with Gadamer's article, "The Proofs of Immortality in Plato's *Phaedo*." The article is relatively straightforward at a first glance, but this apparent simplicity is deceptive. We should examine, however, the "surface content" of the article: for Gadamer, the proofs' incompleteness is intentional and meant to demonstrate "what may be saved of the ancient religious tradition in an age in which scientific explanation and understanding of nature... supplanted the mythological picture of the world, and in an age, as well, in which logic begins to come into its own and assert itself" (Gadamer 21).

Gadamer, then, addresses the tensions of the particular historical moment in which the *Phaedo* is situated—the tension between rationality and mythology, between argument and song<sup>1</sup>. Looking first at the interlocutors, he points out that they are Pythagoreans, and, as such, "stand for that particular sort of mathematical investigation" (23).

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<sup>1</sup> An especially interest opposition considering that when the interlocutors first approach Socrates, he has been composing songs all morning (61a)

Furthermore, when Socrates asks about their teacher Philolas' prohibition of suicide, Simmias and Cebes admit that they know almost nothing of it, and that Philolas rarely spoke about the subject (31). By underlining their ignorance of Philolas' prohibition on suicide, Plato characterizes the interlocutors as "no longer interested in the religious content of the Pythagorean teachings and...[as] genuinely [representative] of the modern Enlightenment" (23). The Pythagorean's strict adherence to scientific reason is in direct contrast with Socrates who "asserts his own ignorance [of modern science]" (23).<sup>2</sup> The juxtaposition of philosophy and science, according to Gadamer, "is obviously meant to show that Plato saw it as his own task to unite the moral introspection for which Socrates stood with the scientific knowledge represented by the Pythagoreans" (23). This account, however convincing, seems radically incomplete, as though it may represent one of the many layers of meaning in the *Phaedo*, but still misses the mark somehow. At any rate, it certainly does not establish the *Phaedo* as one of the greatest texts of Greek philosophy.

Later in the article, however, Gadamer brings his analysis to a quiet climax: "evidently in questions of this sort one cannot expect greater certainty" (36).<sup>3</sup> Given the "importance of the matter [of death] and given our human frailty" (37), we should stay skeptical to proofs that attempt to deploy hard logic in matters that are ultimately outside the purview of scientific certainty. Plato, then, in Gadamer's estimation, intends for us to recognize the shoddiness of the proofs; their failure is the central feature of the dialogue (36). Of course, the point is not that we should not consider these questions; quite the opposite: "and how indeed should the phenomenon of death in all its immensity ever become comprehensible for human reason...and yet how much even so does it continue to demand from human beings a response to its imponderability" (37). Gadamer reads the proofs as a noble, Sisyphean failure. This understanding, however, "runs a bit too smoothly" (*SOI* 154); it skips over some of the nuance of the dialogue and fails to address the central question of the Socratic project—self-knowledge.

### **Reframing, redirecting, reexamining**

At this point, I would like to suggest a reframing of the proofs that may seem strange at first. Perhaps the best way to truly understand the *Phaedo* is to reframe the failed proofs as a metaphor. For what? Could it be that the proofs are meant to be a comment on the self, rather than (or perhaps, in addition to) a commentary on broad historical currents?

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<sup>2</sup> Which raises an interesting question: what is the distinction to be made between the *λόγος* and modern science?

<sup>3</sup> This sentiment also appears in the opening of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: "for it belongs to an educated person to look for just so much precision in each kind of discourse as the nature of the thing one is concerned with admits" (1094b 23-26).

What would justify such a reframing? A broad survey of several Platonic texts shows that the primacy of the self and self-knowledge in the dialogues is asserted continuously.

Let us turn first, not to the *Phaedo*, but to the *Republic*. The “allegory of the cave,” perhaps one of the most widely read examples of Platonic thought, should be most faithfully read *not* as an allegory for the role of the philosopher in political life, but rather as an allegory for the “things within ourselves” that resist “philosophical emancipation” (Sachs 213); hence the opening line: “‘Next,’ I said, ‘make an image of our nature as it involves education and the lack of it’” (*Republic* 514a). The reference to education should not distract us from the main point. Socrates wants to discuss the self’s potential for education, not the political and social obstacles to a successful educational system. Socrates scolds Glaucon later in the dialogue for again thinking in terms of the polis rather than the self: “‘My friend,’ I said, ‘you let it back out of your memory that this no concern of the law’” (519e). Cast in this new light, the allegory depicts an unsettling conception of the subject: a subject which is not atomic, in the sense of being a point of irreducibility, but one that is divided, antagonistic even, against itself.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the comment that the other cave-dwellers would kill the philosopher “ferociously” (517a) becomes even more disturbing.

Though he gives a (superficially) different account in the *Phaedo*, Socrates’ story of how he came to philosophy in the *Apology* also emphasizes the self and self-knowledge; he knew himself and his limitations: “When I heard of this reply I asked myself: ‘Whatever does the god mean?...I am very conscious that *I am not wise at all*’” (*Apology* 21b, emphasis added). Socrates, in contrast to those around him, knew only that he did not know; this, then, is the wisdom of Socrates—failure.

In the *Theatetus*, Socrates, speaking as Protagoras, defends Protagoras’ ontology of flux by claiming that his project is not ontological after all, but is primarily a theory of how we ought to act in the face of a world we cannot control:

I declare the truth holds as I have written it, since each of us is a measure of the things that are and are not...and far from denying that there is wisdom and a wise man, I say that very person is wise who, for any one of us to whom bad things appear and are, makes them change over into a appearing and being goods things. (166d).

Socrates shifts the discussion inward by reframing Protagoras’ statements not as descriptive statements about the quality of Being, but as normative claims about the

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<sup>4</sup> This is a preliminary remark about the “subject” or the “self” in Plato’s dialogues. As we progress, we will further examine what it means for a “subject” to be “divided”, and what role this division itself could possibly play.

way we should deal with the world. Whether or not this constitutes a correct understanding of Protagoras is not relevant to our investigation; we only need to note that the *Theatetus* interprets what is often seen as an ontological position as an ultimately ethical one—an argument about how to compose oneself.

Earlier in the *Theatetus*, there is an odd characterization of the self and its multiplicity. Socrates professes to be the son of a “thoroughly pure-bred and stern midwife” and to “practice the same art” (149A). The implication here is twofold. First, it directs the attention from Socrates to Theatetus; in doing so, Socrates prompts Theatetus to look within himself for the answers to his questions, and not to expect Socrates to provide from without. Theatetus himself already possesses the knowledge and ability; he only needs someone to assist in its “delivery”. Second, is not the reference to pregnancy here especially, if I may, pregnant? Pregnancy is precisely the carrying of another person within oneself—the coincidence of two people, the literal multiplicity of the self.<sup>5</sup>

Even in the *Phaedrus*, where the idea of the *pharmakon* gets treated most directly, there is an emphasis on the self from the very first part of the dialogue: “I am still not able to ‘know myself’ like the Delphic inscription enjoins, and it seems laughable for me to think about other things when I am still ignorant about myself” (239e). In other words, Socrates considers self-knowledge so important as to preempt any other discussion. Could we then expect that in the *Phaedo* he believes he has solved the mystery of self-knowledge and has moved on to other topics? It seems doubtful. He continues, “For me, the question is whether I happen to be some sort of beast even more complex in form and more tumultuous than the hundred-headed Thypo” (230a).<sup>6</sup> Again, Socrates has performed the twofold motion of directing the discussion towards the self and suggesting the “self” is not a holistic, consistent entity.

Where is the evidence for such an interpretation of the *Phaedo*? Suggestions for an inward turn exist throughout the dialogue, but two instances are of particular importance. The first I have already mentioned: Socrates’ account of how he became a philosopher. Though it is admittedly different from the account he gives in the *Apology*, they share a crucial feature. In both accounts, Socrates describes how he came to be interested in looking inwards. In the *Phaedo*, he recounts that he used to “look into beings” (99d) through the physics of Anaxagoras, but quickly discovered that Anaxagoras could only provide him with the physical conditions of possibility without giving him access to the “causes” (99a). He then claims that, in a “second sailing in

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<sup>5</sup> And how does such a multiplicity take place? By the introduction of an outside fluid (*Pharmakon*? Derrida thinks so) into most intimate center of the self. Externality becomes the most primitive and intimate expression of internality.

<sup>6</sup> This is especially relevant to our proceedings when read against Lacan: “The point is not to know whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather to know whether, when I speak of myself, I am the same as the self of whom I speak.” (Lacan 517).

search of the cause...[he took] refuge in accounts” (99d-e).<sup>7</sup> In other words, Socrates found that the outside world could not provide him the answers he was looking for, and so he turned into himself to look for the “causes” he was seeking.

There is another important indicator in the *Phaedo*: in order to locate it, we should “investigate again from the beginning” (*Euthyphro* 15c). The *Phaedo* opens with the following lines:

*Echecrates*: You yourself, Phaedo—were you present with Socrates on that day when he drank the potion in the prison, or did you hear from somebody else?

*Phaedo*: I myself, Echecrates. (57a, emphasis added).

From the *very* beginning, the second word of the dialogue, the emphasis has been placed on the self, on the subject, on Phaedo as a “present” witness. Interestingly, the passage also introduces the Greek term φάρμακον (*pharmakon*, translated here as “potion”). For further enumeration on the coincidence of these concepts (the self, presence, the *pharmakon*), we should turn to Derrida’s essay “Plato’s Pharmacy.”

### **Derrida and the multiplicity of the φάρμακον**

“Plato’s Pharmacy” begins with a simple issue of translation—in the translation from Greek into other languages (here, French, but also in English) the term φάρμακον loses much of its meaning. Derrida spins this concept far and wide, but our focus will be on a specific issue—language as a *pharmakon*. In the original Greek, φάρμακον can mean either “poison” or “remedy;”<sup>8</sup> importantly, however, a *pharmakon* is not simply capable of being either, but is *both at the same time*: “there is no such thing as a harmless remedy. The *pharmakon* can never be simply beneficial” (Derrida 99).

This multiplicity—again not a simple multiplicity of definitions, but rather a coincidence of multiplicities in a singularity—leads Derrida to observe that “the essence of the *pharmakon* lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no “proper” characteristics, it is not, in any sense of the word, a *substance*” (126), and that “liquid is the element of the *pharmakon*...In liquid, opposites are more easily mixed”

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase “second sailing” seems to suggest that the logos is “second best”. We will return to this issue later, but for now keep in mind that perhaps Socrates is hinting that the logos necessarily is not perfect.

<sup>8</sup> The term also means a multitude of other things—“sperm, water, ink, paint, perfumed dye” (Derrida 152)—but for our purposes, we will mainly concern ourselves with the meanings of poison and remedy.



(152). Furthermore, “the word *pharmakon* is caught in a chain of significations”<sup>9</sup> (95). The *pharmakon* is a wily, slippery, ever-shifting, and, importantly, *empty* element.

But we should pay special attention to one parallel Derrida draws—the “democracy” of the *pharmakon* (144). Specifically referencing the *Republic*, he draws several important parallels:

This errant democrat, wandering like a desire or like a signifier freed from *logos*...who gives himself equally to all pleasures, to all activities—eventually even to politics or philosophy—this adventurer, like the one in the *Phaedrus*, simulates everything at random and *is really nothing*. Swept off by every stream, he belongs to the masses; *he has no essence, no truth, no patronym, no constitution of his own* (145).

Given that we have already directed our attention to the self, and not to matters of politics, this is especially interesting. In this new light, we see three themes, three terms emerging and converging—*pharmakon*, language (signifiers), and the self. Can we not then suggest that the dialogues may be suggesting that the self is a *pharmakon*? What would such a suggestion entail? And how does it relate to the proofs in the *Phaedo*?

#### “A shape to fill a lack” or a shape that IS a lack?

Keeping in mind what we have already discussed, how do the proofs function as a metaphor in the *Phaedo*? To be clear, the term “soul” in the *Phaedo* does not have any of the specific religious connotations it has in modern usage. For all intents and purposes, it can be understood as another word for the part of each of us that is monoeidetic—the *eidos*, the essence that makes us who we are—or, the self.

How, then, are we to understand the metaphor of the proofs? At a first glance, it would seem that the proofs fail because of some misapplication of the *logos*—perhaps if Socrates were more careful with his argument, he would be able to construct a complete and convincing proof. This is certainly the attitude of the interlocutors; as Gadamer pointed out, they have the utmost faith in the power of reason to allay their fears. Such an attitude seems ridiculous to modern readers—how could we ever, speaking with Gadamer, expect to fully comprehend and quantify the self and its death?

The next line of argument (roughly represented by Gadamer) would be closer to the truth—the reason the proofs fail is because they are an attempt to use the *logos* in a

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<sup>9</sup> This concept can be traced back to Lacan: “The second property of the signifier, that of combining according to the laws of a closed order, affirms the necessity of the topological substratum, of which the term I usually use “signifying chain,” gives an approximate idea” (Lacan 501).

matter that can never be made certain. There is definitely evidence for such a reading; consider the fact that before giving the first proof, Socrates (slyly, almost unnoticeably) offers not proofs, but a *story*: “Or do you want us to tell a more thorough story about these things to see whether what we’re saying is likely or not?” (70b). Furthermore, it is important to note that Socrates does not offer certainty, but whether the immortality of the soul is “likely.” This explanation, however, seems far too simplistic. As we have already seen, it loses track of the orientation towards the self of the dialogues and fails to consider how the dialogues might relate to Socrates’ ultimate project—self-knowledge.

What is left then? Perhaps the proofs fail because the method being employed—the logos—is not itself a coherent totality; it has own open spots, necessary failures. This is, more or less, Derrida’s line of argumentation. The first thing one would point to in such an argument is the reliance on binaries: “And let’s investigate it in some such way as this: Either the souls of human beings who’ve met their end are in Hades or they’re not” (70c). Derrida then shows that such binaries are always-already (nearly) impossible to maintain—philosophy versus sophistry, poison versus remedy, absence versus presence, etc. These binaries deconstruct because one side is always necessarily founded by a gesture of its opposite; for example, the condition of the possibility of thinking scientifically is a fundamentally *ascientific*<sup>10</sup> gesture—the dogmatic assumption of the principle of reason.<sup>11</sup> And given that the argumentation used in the proofs relies so heavily on these binaries, we only need to “do memory work...in order to deconstruct [the text]” (Kerby).<sup>12</sup>

This reading, however, does not quiet go far enough. It paints the self as a victim of the failures of language; insofar as we can recognize that language is the only window we have to approach problems of philosophy, we also know that language is not a coherent and stable system. This is the Derridean understanding of the self: a decentered non-entity fully at the mercy of the language it is enslaved to use, or more appropriately, be used by. In other words, we can only define ourselves with reference to some outside source (the logos, language, death, etc) which “always-already truncates” any attempt

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<sup>10</sup> The term “ascientific” is important—it is not an “unscientific” gesture. In order for something to be “unscientific” it would need to be a failure of the scientific method. The foundational gesture, however, is outside the scope of the scientific method itself.

<sup>11</sup> Or, as Heidegger put it, what is the reason for the principle of reason? (Heidegger 120) Importantly, there cannot be one.

<sup>12</sup> In order to avoid a simplistic reading of Derrida, however, it must be noted that the point is not to eliminate these binaries or to claim an “all-embracing textuality” (*FTKN* 31)—such a claim would simply be replacing one totality with another. The point is to question the existence and coherence of *any* theory of identity.

to know ourselves (*FTKN* 37). In other words, the Derridean subject is “conceived as an effect of a fundamentally non-subjective process” (*SOI* 174).

Here we should assert, with Žižek, that this is only part of the picture—insofar as we *must* use language, we can also use its failures as a window into ourselves. It is not a question of whether language uses us or whether we use language—the opposition is false. Instead, there is a give and take. We can use, as Socrates does in the *Phaedo*, the failure of language and the logos to describe ourselves as the accurate description of ourselves. Deconstruction, then, does not reveal the self—deconstruction *is* the self (*FTKN* 37).

If this transition from Derrida to Žižek seems obscure, I would point the reader to the somewhat analogous move in Žižek’s own writing between Kant and Hegel. For Žižek, Kant conceived of the self as epistemologically limited—we cannot fully know the subject because we are forced, by nature of being subjects, to use language and reason. Hegel, by Žižek’s reading, ontologized this rupture and claimed that it was not a failure of language per say, but was rather a constitutive feature of reality itself (Johnston).

Turning back to the *Phaedo*, we see this understanding at work in the proofs. Socrates understands that the proofs will fail—not because we the logos cannot be applied with certainty to the self, and not because the logos is not a totality—but because the inability to provide a full definition of the self *is* the only proper definition of the self. This is evidenced by Socrates appreciation of the fact that Simmias remains doubtful at the end of the dialogue:

“To be sure, said, he Simmias, “I’m certainly not in a position to be at all distrustful any longer, given what’s being argued. And yet I’m compelled—both by the bigness of what our arguments are about, and because I hold our human weakness in dishonor—to have some lingering distrust within myself concerning what’s been said.”

“Not only that, Simmias,” said Socrates. “What you say is good, but also our very first hypotheses—even if to all of you they’re trustworthy—must nevertheless be looked into for greater surety. And if you sort them out sufficiently, you will, as I think, be following up the argument as much as it’s possible for a human being to follow it. And should this very thing become sure, you’ll search no further” (107a-b).

Socrates recognizes that the possibility of their failure is inscribed into the proofs from the very beginning.<sup>13</sup> In Žižek’s language, “the subject of the signifier is a retroactive effect of the failure of his own representation; *that’s why the failure of representation is*

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<sup>13</sup> Lacan has a name for this as well—the phallus.

*the only way to represent him adequately*” (Lacanian Real, emphasis added). This, then, is the proper reading of the proofs in terms of the self—the only way to describe the self is in terms of their failure as such. The failure is constitutive, definitive, and complete.

### **What would Plato say about our epoch?**

In a speech in 2009, Žižek repeated Adorno’s assertion that, when we are dealing with great thinkers, we should “reject the patronizing question, ‘what is dead and what is still alive’” in their thought. Instead, we should ask, “what are we, our contemporary situation, in his eyes? How would we appear in his or her eyes?” (“Revolutionary”). We should approach the dialogues with the same respect, and, in doing so, ask the question, “what would Plato have to say about our ‘postmodern’ or ‘poststructuralist’ view of the self?” We find the answer in the *Phaedo*’s failed proofs. The fact of the proofs’ failure *is* the accomplishment of the *Phaedo* that makes it “one of the most marvelous and significant writings in all Greek philosophy” (Gadamer 21).

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