

# Ancient Readings of Plato's *Phaedo*

*Edited by*

Sylvain Delcomminette

Pieter d'Hoine

Marc-Antoine Gavray



BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

# Contents

List of Contributors VII

Introduction 1

*Sylvain Delcomminette, Pieter d'Hoine and Marc-Antoine Gavray*

Aristote et le *Phédon* 17

*Sylvain Delcomminette*

Strato of Lampsacus as a Reader of Plato's *Phaedo*: His Critique of the Soul's Immortality 37

*Han Baltussen*

Le *Phédon* dans le Stoïcisme hellénistique et post-hellénistique 63

*Francesca Alesse*

Sextus, the Number Two and the *Phaedo* 90

*Lorenzo Corti*

Plutarch's Reception of Plato's *Phaedo* 107

*Geert Roskam*

The *Phaedo* in Numenian Allegorical Interpretation 134

*Harold Tarrant*

Plotin lecteur du *Phédon*: l'âme et la vie en IV 7 [2] 11 154

*Riccardo Chiaradonna*

Syrianus and the *Phaedo* 173

*Pieter d'Hoine*

Damascius, Olympiodore et Proclus sur les attributs « divin » (θεῖον) et « intelligible » (νοητόν) en *Phédon* 80a10–b1 dans l'argument dit « de la similitude » 212

*Alain Lernoùld*

**From 'Immortal' to 'Imperishable': Damascius on the Final Argument in  
Plato's *Phaedo*** 240

*Sebastian Gertz*

**La théorie de l'âme-harmonie chez les commentateurs anciens** 256

*Franco Trabattoni*

**« Nombreux sont les porteurs de thyrses, mais rares les Bacchants ».**

**Olympiodore et Damascius sur le *Phédon*** 270

*Bram Demulder et Gerd Van Riel*

**Au terme d'une tradition: Simplicius, lecteur du *Phédon*** 293

*Marc-Antoine Gavray*

**Bibliography** 311

**Index locorum** 336

**Index nominum** 357

**Index rerum** 360

# Introduction

*Sylvain Delcomminette, Pieter d'Hoine and Marc-Antoine Gavray*

For Western culture, Plato's *Phaedo* is above all the story of Socrates' death. Set on the very last day of the great philosopher's life, the dialogue begins with a gathering of his closest friends who pay him a last visit in prison, and ends with the drinking of the hemlock—followed by Socrates' final words, an enigmatic reminder of a debt to Asclepius. Within this narrative frame, which arguably makes the *Phaedo* Plato's most moving composition, the main part of the dialogue is devoted to the philosophical discussion that Socrates is supposed to have held with his friends on the day of his execution. As is well known, the theme of their exchanges is, appropriately, the immortality of the soul. In the course of their inquiry, however, the interlocutors address a wide range of issues, relating not only to psychology, but also to ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, the philosophy of nature, and cosmology. The importance of this dialogue for our understanding of Plato's thought and indeed, for the history of Western philosophy as a whole, cannot be easily overestimated.

Already in Antiquity, from Aristotle to the last of the Neoplatonists, the dialogue featured prominently in debates on the philosophical way of life, on the destiny of the soul in the afterlife, on Platonic Forms, on the acquisition of knowledge, on the virtues, and on many other topics. Even a superficial glance at the extant commentaries on the dialogue from Antiquity—all three derived from lecture notes by Damascius (ca. 462–550AD) and Olympiodorus (ca. 495/505–565) in the fifth and sixth century AD—reveals them to be the fruit of a long, although mostly lost, exegetical tradition. Unlike the dialogue itself, however, the *Phaedo's* reception in Antiquity has received little scholarly attention in recent decades.<sup>1</sup> This is unsurprising, given the provenance of the surviving commentaries: Damascius and Olympiodorus had to wait until the quite recent past to re-emerge from a relative oblivion. Moreover, the

---

1 Notable exceptions include the excellent annotated edition and translation of the commentaries by L.G. Westerink (*The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, 2 vol., ed. and trans. by L.G. Westerink, Amsterdam: North Holland, 1976–1977), which provides a mass of information, as yet unsurpassed, on the exegetical tradition of the dialogue, and the recent monograph by S. Gertz, *Death and Immortality in Late Neoplatonism. Studies on the Ancient Commentators on Plato's Phaedo*, Leiden: Brill, 2011, which represents the first systematic survey of the entire commentaries.

great revival of Neoplatonic studies that we have witnessed in the past thirty or forty years was motivated less by a desire to better our own understanding of Plato by means of Neoplatonic insights into his writings than by the new-found appreciation for the Neoplatonists as important thinkers in their own right. In this respect, however, the commentaries on the *Phaedo* may have less to offer for us than the Neoplatonists' more systematic works or those voluminous commentaries on their most cherished dialogues, such as the *Timaeus* or the *Parmenides*. Yet the commentators, as well as the fragments of their predecessors which they have preserved, deserve far more attention than has hitherto been granted them. They are of central importance not only for our understanding of the development of philosophical exegesis in Antiquity, but also for their unique insights into the dialogue, and for the critical distance that they offer us with regard to contemporary readings of the *Phaedo*.

Nevertheless, the exegetical history of the dialogue is only one of the narratives that could be offered about the fate of the *Phaedo* in Antiquity. It is not merely, and perhaps not principally, to their admirers and exegetes that the great books of philosophy owe their enduring reputation. At least as important for the history of the *Phaedo* in Antiquity are the critical responses to it by the opponents of Plato or the later Platonists, such as the Peripatetics, the Stoics, or the Sceptics. Finally, it could be argued that the merits of a philosophical text must also be measured by the creative use later thinkers make of it. To retrace such appropriations is not an easy task—the evidence is much more scattered, debts often go unacknowledged, and a thinker's own ideas may obscure his sources in the process of transforming them. Yet digging into the *Phaedo's* tremendous influence on later developments in psychology, mathematical theory, literary criticism, or natural philosophy is as vital a task as any if we are to examine the history of the *Phaedo* in Antiquity.

Thus, while the relative neglect of ancient interpretations of the *Phaedo* in recent scholarship is understandable, it is our conviction that a systematic treatment of the history of the reception of this dialogue can offer novel perspectives on the philosophical debates amongst the ancient schools of thought, on the exegetical discussions within the Platonic schools, on the fate of Plato's ideas in Antiquity and beyond, and can even challenge some of our own ideas about Plato. The present volume aims to offer just such a treatment. In an attempt to reconstruct the main lines of the interpretation of the *Phaedo* in Antiquity, one of its ambitions is to shed light on the sources of the surviving Neoplatonic commentaries, as well as on less familiar or less expected engagements with the dialogue in the ancient philosophical tradition. Over and above this historical purpose, however, we hope that this volume will also aid in situating modern interpretations of the *Phaedo* within a larger commentatorial tra-

dition, thereby allowing us to compare and contrast the changing philosophical and methodological presuppositions regarding this dialogue. By unearthing long-neglected exegetical suggestions, as well as by shedding light on dead ends and what may appear to some as mistaken perspectives, the present work may provide new impetus for contemporary research on the dialogue. In other words, it may help to show what ancient readings can and cannot offer living interpreters of Plato.

We referred above to three different attitudes towards the dialogue in Antiquity: exegesis, critical response, and appropriation. In the remainder of this introduction, we will present the papers assembled here under these three headings, thus proposing some possible pathways through the contents of this volume.

## 1 Critical Responses

Let us first discuss the attitude of critics towards the dialogue. As one would expect, the *Phaedo*'s first critic was Aristotle. It is striking, however, that in the works which have come down to us, Aristotle focuses less on the teachings of the dialogue concerning the soul—in which he nevertheless seems to have found some inspiration for his own views, at least at some point of his career (see section 3 below)—than on its implications for the foundation of natural science. As **Sylvain Delcomminette** explains, it seems very probable that Aristotle had the *Phaedo* in mind when composing such foundational works as *Physics I*, *On Generation and Corruption* and *Metaphysics A*. Yet, as is so often his habit, we find him more eager to point out the shortcomings he detects in his master's work than to acknowledge his debts. One of his favourite targets is the theory of causality introduced by Socrates near the end of the dialogue (*Phd.* 100b–101d), which, according to the Stagirite, achieves far less than it should.

We have good evidence that Plato's *Phaedo* became a perennial target of criticism within the Peripatetic school after Aristotle. The most famous representative of this tradition of criticism is Strato of Lampsacus, head of the Lyceum from 287 to 269 BC, whose objections were apparently followed by the later Peripatetic Boethus of Sidon (fl. 1st century BC). It is difficult to reconstruct the original form of Strato's attack and its function in his work, as it has come down to us as no more than a list of *aporiai* in one of Damascius' commentaries. The preserved fragments focus on Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul, and are notable for anticipating modern criticisms of, for instance, the final argument by pointing out that the 'deathlessness' of the soul at stake in the argument is ambiguous. While it relies on the soul's incapacity to receive

its contrary, i.e. death, the final argument does not support the conclusion that the soul is deathless in the sense of having inextinguishable life—which would be required were the soul to be imperishable. According to Strato, Plato only proved that it belongs to the soul's essence to be alive as long as it is present in a body, but not that it is imperishable: the soul may perish, not by receiving death, but rather through loss of life. **Han Baltussen** argues that there are good reasons for believing that these *aporiai* played an important role in Strato's defence of his own physicalist theory of cognitive activity, grounded in the hypothesis that acknowledging the physical nature of the soul allows for a better understanding of how it can be related to the body and how it can change during cognition. The use of these *aporiai* may be deemed 'dialectical', provided that one understands this term in light of Aristotle's *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*, which attribute to dialectic, over and above its role as an exercise, a heuristic and constructive function in the search for truth. In any case, these *aporiai* were not considered as purely formal by later Platonists, but were on the contrary taken very seriously as potentially undermining the consistency of Plato's dualism. Later interpreters of the dialogue therefore found it necessary to respond to them, sometimes even to the point of adapting or correcting Plato's text. Plotinus (205–270 AD) might already have engaged in this practice, as **Riccardo Chiaradonna** suggests, paving the way for the much more systematic responses of Proclus and Damascius, explored by **Sebastian Gertz** (see section 3 below).

The main Hellenistic schools do not seem to have indulged in elaborate criticism of the *Phaedo*. As for the Stoics, **Francesca Alesse** shows that Chrysippus (ca. 280–206 BC) does allude several times to the dialogue, sometimes in a clearly polemical manner. There is, however, no trace of a more systematic engagement with the dialogue. An interesting case is the later platonizing Stoic Panaetius of Rhodes (ca. 185–110 BC), who is reputed to have declared the *Phaedo* inauthentic because of its incompatibility with his own rejection of the immortality of the soul—and hence with his attempt to bring Stoicism and Platonism into accord. The evidence for such a rejection remains nonetheless vague and is perhaps fundamentally misleading: it is possible, and even probable, that Panaetius was rather rejecting the authenticity of the dialogues attributed to the Socratic *Phaedo* of Elis (fl. first half of the 4th century BC), and we have no proof that this position was grounded in their doctrinal content—whatever it was.

As for the Sceptics, a marginal, though very interesting, mention of the *Phaedo* has been found by **Lorenzo Corti** in the works of Sextus Empiricus (fl. 2nd century AD). In his attack against the Academic theory of number which purported, first, to derive all numbers from the One and the Two, and second, to construct geometrical objects out of the first four numbers, the

Sceptic refers to a passage of Socrates' so-called autobiography (*Phd.* 96e–97b), where the Athenian philosopher raises a puzzle about the way the number two might be formed from a conjunction of units. Most commentators, ancient and modern, consider that Socrates raises two problems in this passage: (1) what is the subject of the predicate 'come to be two'? and (2) what is the cause of the coming to be two? Socrates would then ignore the first problem and concentrate on the second, denying that addition can explain this coming to be two and turning to the Form of Two (in 101b–c). However, it is not clear that Socrates raises the first question at all; actually, he seems to leave the subject of this process undetermined. What really interests him is rather how we can explain the fact that there are now two things where there was only one before. This seems to be the reading of the passage Sextus favours, given the way he uses it against his adversaries. In characteristic form, Sextus uses an argument he finds in Plato against a theory developed in the context of Plato's Academy. One may nevertheless suspect that this argument misses the mark and is, in fact, a mere sophism. From this point of view, it is all the more striking that Sextus does not consider Plato's *own* solution to the puzzle, i.e. the appeal to the Forms—a solution, of course, unacceptable to a Sceptic. In any case, this use of an argument from the *Phaedo* by Sextus testifies that the dialogue remained alive in the philosophical debates of that time, even outside the framework of official Platonism, which was about to reinstitutionalize itself.

## 2 Exegetical Approaches

Another major approach to the *Phaedo*, which developed within the Platonic schools of Antiquity, was that of exegesis. Any attitude towards a text starts with an interpretative effort—in this sense, we must assume that a hermeneutical operation or a more or less explicit exegesis underlies any critical response or deliberate appropriation of the dialogue as well. The boundaries between the different approaches are not always easy to draw. Some works, however, present themselves explicitly as interpretations of other texts. This phenomenon is ubiquitous in the philosophy of the Imperial age, where philosophy was more often than not taught through the study of philosophical or religious texts that were considered to be authoritative in some domain of knowledge. Not only has the collective reading of texts in this period superseded lively philosophical dialogue as the main vehicle for transmitting ideas in the philosopher's classroom, but in the course of this period the written commentary also establishes itself as the philosophical genre *par excellence*. While this phenomenon is not limited to the Platonic schools—similar things could be said about the Peripatetics,



for instance—, nor to the Imperial age in general, it is however in Imperial Platonism that the commentary tradition is best known and documented. This stems from the fact that Platonism, following its return to dogmatism after the sceptical interlude of the New Academy, gradually established itself as the dominant school of thought in the first centuries of our era—a status it had certainly reached by the 3rd century AD, when Plotinus inaugurated the branch of Platonism now commonly called 'Neoplatonism'.

Our evidence for the exegesis of the *Phaedo* before the institutionalization of the great Neoplatonic schools is unfortunately very sketchy. Apart from the extant commentaries by much later authors such as Damascius and Olympiodorus, all that remains of the exegetical history of the *Phaedo* are quotations, references and more or less explicit allusions to the dialogue, spread over a vast number of works. For an idea of how much of the exegetical history of the dialogue necessarily escapes us, it suffices to look at the Neo-Pythagorean and Middle-Platonist Numenius (fl. second half of the 2nd century AD). The scarce evidence concerning his interpretation of the *Phaedo* is gathered together and placed in context by Harold Tarrant in this volume. As Tarrant argues, the extant fragments of Numenius suggest that he was not primarily concerned with the argumentative content of the dialogue, but rather with Socrates' understanding of the ancient wisdom of the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition, particularly on the true status of human life both here and beyond death. Thus it is clearly Numenius' own philosophical agenda which colours his reading of the *Phaedo*. His eagerness for allegorical interpretation and his sensitivity for real or presumed allusions to Orphic ideas in the dialogue can also be related to his Pythagorean obedience. If Numenius is important for the exegetical tradition, it is mainly because of his willingness to dig beneath the surface of the text.

The situation became very different within the Platonic schools of later Antiquity, where philosophical education was organized around a canon of texts. The Syrian Iamblichus, a pupil of Porphyry, developed in the late 3rd or early 4th century AD a curriculum of studies that would remain authoritative at least until the 6th century, as can be inferred from Marinus' biography of Proclus and from the anonymous *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*. This curriculum started with a first cycle of studies devoted to Aristotle, a selection of whose works on logic were read, followed by practical and theoretical philosophy. Once this cycle was successfully completed, the student could move on to the 'greater mysteries' represented by a canonical selection from Plato's dialogues. This cycle consisted of two parts. In the first, the students were to read, under the guidance of the master, a set of ten dialogues, starting with the *First Alcibiades*, the *Gorgias*, and the *Phaedo*, then continuing on in due order with

the *Cratylus*, the *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist*, the *Statesman*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Symposium*, and ending with the *Philebus*. Reading these dialogues and commenting on them were supposed to result in moral progress, as each dialogue was taken to correspond to a well-defined stage within an ascending scale of virtues. Finally, the curriculum culminated with two dialogues, the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*, which, according to Iamblichus and his successors, provided Plato's most profound and systematic expositions on the physical and the metaphysical or theological realms respectively.<sup>2</sup>

One important supposition behind this curriculum of studies is that each dialogue could be assigned a central goal or *skopos*, on the basis of which the dialogue as a whole had to be interpreted and to which it owed its place within the curriculum. The *Phaedo* was supposed to be concerned with the cathartic virtues, which help the soul to free itself from its communion with the body. In spite of its importance for crucial Platonic themes such as the soul and the Forms, the dialogue therefore occupied a relatively early position in the curriculum, since purification from the body could only serve for the Neoplatonists as a preliminary step for the higher theoretical virtues and the true Platonic mystagogy. This is certainly one of the reasons why, unlike the extant commentaries on the *Timaeus* or the *Parmenides*, the commentaries on the *Phaedo* are less steeped in Neoplatonic metaphysical speculation and often stay closer to the letter of Plato's text. As a result, we often find the Neoplatonists struggling with the very same interpretative issues that we still encounter in the text today, which makes it all the more rewarding to confront our readings with theirs. Examples of this are provided by the papers of **Franco Trabattoni**, **Pieter d'Hoine** and **Sebastian Gertz**, who discuss the later Neoplatonists' interpretations of the refutation of the theory of the soul as *harmonia* (*Phd.* 85b–95a), the argument from opposites (*Phd.* 69e–72d) and the last section of the final argument for the immortality of the soul (106c–107a), sections of the text which remain the focus of many discussions today and about which Neoplatonic readings can certainly offer original and perceptive insights to the contemporary interpreter.

Given the place of the study of Aristotle's texts in the Neoplatonic curriculum, it comes as no surprise that the Stagirite's thought sometimes plays the role of a filter through which Plato's dialogue was read. This can have distorting

---

2 On the Neoplatonic curriculum and its relation to the scale of virtues, see e.g. P. Hoffmann, 'What was Commentary in Late Antiquity? The Example of the Neoplatonic Commentators', in: M.L. Gill—P. Pellegrin (eds.), *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, 597–622; and D. Baltzly, 'The Human Life', in: P. d'Hoine—M. Martijn (eds.), *All from One: A Guide to Proclus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

effects, as **Franco Trabattoni** argues, for example when Damascius and Philoponus (ca. 490–570 AD) conflate Plato's argument against the theory of the soul as *harmonia* with Aristotle's own version in the lost dialogue *Eudemus*, which introduced the difference between the categories of substance and quality. This makes the study of their commentaries all the more relevant for the contemporary exegete of the *Phaedo*, for we may still be under the spell of such a conflation. On other occasions, one might consider that the Aristotelian filter brings positive results, as for instance when Syrianus uses Aristotle's distinction between different kinds of opposites to bring conceptual clarity into the discussion of the argument from contraries/opposites, or when he attempts to provide a syllogistic reconstruction of Plato's text. Even though few of us would agree with Syrianus' actual reconstruction, **Pieter d'Hoine** shows that, even in its failures, such an attempt can not only shed light on the argumentative structure of the passage, but also on the tacit premises that must be presupposed to make Plato's argument work, in a way which many of us may still find valuable today.

As mentioned above, it is only from the very last phase of ancient thought, from the 5th and 6th centuries AD, that entire commentaries on the *Phaedo* have survived, two of which are now attributed to Damascius and one to Olympiodorus. However, as was common practice in the commentary tradition, Damascius in particular (and to a lesser extent Olympiodorus) has integrated a host of material from previous interpreters of the dialogue, which makes him a valuable source for the reconstruction of the exegetical history of the *Phaedo* in later Antiquity. It is generally agreed that both Damascius and Olympiodorus are largely dependent upon a now lost commentary by the great Athenian commentator of the 5th century, Proclus. Yet Damascius also discusses interpretations proposed by earlier Platonists, such as Plutarch of Chaeronea, Iamblichus, and Syrianus, as well as objections raised against the views expressed in the dialogue, such as those developed by Strato, for whom Damascius is our main source. Damascius and Olympiodorus thus stand in a long exegetical tradition, the main lines of which we can only retrace thanks to their own commentaries.

A landmark in this tradition is Syrianus, who in the early 5th century wrote a *monobiblos* on the argument from opposites (*Phd.* 69e–72d), studied by **Pieter d'Hoine** in this volume. From the quotations from this monograph by Damascius and Olympiodorus, we learn that Syrianus addressed questions that are still of vital importance for anyone interested in the argumentative structure of the dialogue. One of the issues raised by Syrianus is how the different proofs for the immortality of the soul relate to one another. Against previous interpreters of the dialogue who had claimed that each of the arguments for immortality aims to provide a sufficient proof in itself, Syrianus seems to have been the

first to read the dialogue as a gradual ascent towards demonstrative certainty. Syrianus believed that the cyclical argument only establishes the survival of the soul for some time after its separation from the body, and he left it to the other arguments to provide further building blocks for the demonstration of the soul's immortality, which he believed was given only in the final argument of the dialogue. In this, Syrianus proves to be a close reader of the *Phaedo*, since the argument from opposites is a direct response to Cebes' demand to show that the soul is not immediately dispersed upon its separation from the body.

As was said above, Damascius' and Olympiodorus' main source is Syrianus' pupil, Proclus. Since his own commentary on the dialogue is lost, it is worthwhile to connect the information on the *Phaedo* that we find in Proclus' preserved works with the commentary tradition on that dialogue. In his contribution, **Alain Lernould** compares the information provided by the commentaries on the *Phaedo* about the argument 'from similarity' with Proclus' use of it in the first book of the *Platonic Theology*. In establishing the soul's affinity with the Forms, the Platonic Socrates at *Phd.* 80a–b claims that whereas the soul is akin to what is divine, immortal, intelligible, unitary, indissoluble and self-resembling, the body, by contrast, has more affinity with what is human, mortal, unintelligible (*anoeton*), multifarious, corruptible and subject to change. The Neoplatonists interpret this opposition in terms of a distinction between the intelligible Forms and the forms immanent in sensible particulars. Lernould argues that the interpretation of the six attributes in the extant commentaries on the *Phaedo* can be properly understood only by relating it to the complex ontological structure of later Neoplatonism and to the later Platonic views on the relation between Intellect and the intelligible. He further discusses how Proclus, in the *Platonic Theology*, interprets the six properties of intelligible reality in the *Phaedo* as attributes of the divine, i.e. of everything in any way existing between the One and Soul. Here we find an example of how exegesis of a text is tightly linked with one's own appropriation of it—an attitude that will be further discussed in the next section.

The fact that the three extant commentaries derive from lectures delivered in two distinct Neoplatonic schools, namely Athens (Damascius) and Alexandria (Olympiodorus), also provides a rare opportunity to confront the Platonisms of the two main intellectual centres of the time with one another and to gain some insight into the intra-school debates. The paper by **Bram Demulder** and **Gerd Van Riel** has precisely this goal. Many scholars have assumed that a major difference between Damascius and Olympiodorus results from the alleged fact that the latter had to face the hostility of a Christian *milieu* and therefore omitted details about the highest levels of the Neoplatonic sys-

tem. However, Demulder and Van Riel show that divergences between the commentaries largely depend on the different audiences they address, rather than on any presumed censorship deliberately imposed on Olympiodorus by a Christian audience. Olympiodorus taught students who were not prone to become philosophers, but who considered philosophy (together with rhetoric or mathematics) as a useful preparation for public life, whereas Damascius could address a more philosophically minded audience. The authors support their thesis with two case studies: the first concerning the commentators' exegesis of the discussion on suicide (*Phd.* 61c–62b), the second about their treatment of the virtues (*Phd.* 68b–69e).

The story of the *Phaedo's* interpretations in Antiquity does not end with Damascius or Olympiodorus. In the works of the last great Athenian commentator, Simplicius (ca. 490–560AD), we get a glimpse of the influence of Damascius' commentary on later interpreters. Simplicius is of course best known for his massive commentaries on Aristotle and references to the *Phaedo* are rather scarce in his work, as **Marc-Antoine Gavray** shows in his contribution. He is also reputed for having defended the 'harmony' of Plato and Aristotle to an extent that many readers of these two giant philosophers today cannot but deem radical. In fact, the idea that the views of Plato and Aristotle about most issues were largely in agreement or at the very least compatible was widely shared among the Imperial Platonists, and the Neoplatonic commentators, from Porphyry onwards, had all subscribed to this view to a greater or a lesser extent. However, the Athenians Syrianus, Proclus, and Damascius did not hesitate to criticize the Stagirite openly, even though their own views are imbued with concepts, doctrines and lines of reasoning borrowed from him, as we have seen. Simplicius, for his part, famously made it a requirement for the good interpreter that he be able to bring out the *symphonia* between Plato and Aristotle on all issues that matter. These two features—Simplicius' reception of Damascius' commentary, and his harmonization of Plato and Aristotle—are illustrated by Gavray's closing paper. Two at first sight erroneous references to the *Phaedo* are discussed in greater detail. Gavray shows that these references actually have their origin in the exegetical tradition of the *Phaedo*, more particularly in Proclus' and Damascius' cosmological reading of the dialogue's final myth, from which Simplicius' borrowings are, however, only partial and, as a result, rather puzzling. While thus relying on the exegesis of the *Phaedo* by the Athenian commentators, Simplicius also goes beyond his sources in defending the harmony of his physical reading of the final myth, according to which the earth has a stable position in the centre of the universe, both with Plato's claims in other dialogues and with Aristotle's view in the *De cælo*.

### 3 Appropriations

The third and final approach to the *Phaedo* which we want to single out consists in using the dialogue in the context of one's own thought, sometimes very remote from Plato's. One can distinguish between three kinds of appropriations: historical, literary, and philosophical.

The modern reader may be surprised that in Antiquity the *Phaedo* was often regarded as a primarily *historical* document, in the sense that readers used it as a reliable source about the historical figure of Socrates. Considering Plato as a Socratic author, the Stoics read the *Phaedo* as a *logos socratikos* informing us about Socrates' thought: regardless of its literary reshaping, they believed that the dialogue gives a truthful account of Socrates' death and of his teachings about it. In this sense, the *Phaedo* looks like a hagiographical narrative of exemplary behaviour in the face of death—an attitude suitable for a sage. Even more surprising is Numenius' understanding of the *Phaedo* as a source for Pythagoreanism. Numenius does not approach the *Phaedo* in order to extract any information about the history of ancient Pythagoreanism from it—such information can be drawn from other sources—, but he does think that the *Phaedo* gives access to Socrates' understanding of Orphic and Pythagorean doctrines, such as metempsychosis or the soul's imprisonment in the body. In both cases, as is shown by **Francesca Alesse** for the Stoics and by **Harold Tarrant** for Numenius, these readers of Plato are not really interested in accurate historical testimony; rather, they attempt to return to Socrates' thought. In this regard, the dramatic setting of the dialogue attracts their attention more than its philosophical content, since that setting is supposed to reflect Socrates' words and deeds. This helps to explain why references to the *Phaedo* often remain implicit in these works, because they are hidden behind the figure of Socrates.

This historical use of the *Phaedo* is not unrelated to an approach that one could describe as *literary* or *rhetorical*—an approach that mostly consists in assimilating the *Phaedo*, its themes or its narrative in the production of a new literary work. Plutarch gives us the best illustration of this attitude. Though an omnivorous reader, fond of Homer's poems and of Plato's dialogues, Plutarch scarcely quotes the *Phaedo*. When he does, it is often rather unexpectedly or in a context with no direct connection to its source. As **Geert Roskam** argues, Plutarch's attitude reflects his excellent knowledge of the *Phaedo*, which is displayed in a playful game with the reader and, more broadly, in the composition of his works. Plutarch usually restricts himself to implicit allusions or vague and often inaccurate references to the *Phaedo*, leaving it to his educated reader to discover his sources. He often makes use of the narrative sections of

the dialogue (rather than of the argumentative ones), transferring them to a new context. Plutarch thus emulates the setting of Plato's dialogue, or Socrates' attitudes towards his companions, using the very same words and making the reference explicit, so as to compose a 'literary narratological model'. This literary use even extends to the composition of characters. As Roskam shows, however, Plutarch's use of the *Phaedo* does not merely serve a literary or rhetorical purpose, but is also a way to invoke a larger philosophical context, forcing the reader to confront it and to change his attitude accordingly.

This leads us to a third variant of this approach: the *philosophical* appropriation. Such an attitude is not restricted to Platonists: actually, even declared adversaries of Plato have found some inspiration in the *Phaedo*, borrowing doctrines or arguments that they consider valid in order to build on them in contexts foreign to Plato. According to Sylvain Delcomminette, the main influence of the *Phaedo* on Aristotle is to be found in the way the Stagirite institutes physics as a science, i.e. in his theory of change and causes. First, the *Phaedo* formulates the principle that every change takes place between contraries (103b–c), an idea that *Physics* 1 5 claims to derive from the inquiries of the *physiologoi*. Second, in the very same passage, Socrates distinguishes between contraries and their bearers, a distinction that Aristotle is usually thought to have introduced in the *Physics*. Third, in the 'autobiographical' section of the *Phaedo*, Socrates can be taken to anticipate Aristotle's distinction between different *kinds* of causes—even though Aristotle famously blamed Plato for having recognised only material and formal causes. Moreover, even the order adopted in *Metaphysics* A for the 'history of philosophy' may be traced back to the *Phaedo*. Finally, it could be argued that the very form of demonstrative science, grounded on the causal role of the middle term in a scientific syllogism, is heralded in the *Phaedo*. Of course, these affinities should not lead us to conclude that Aristotle's entire theory of generation and corruption was already contained in Plato. Despite these similarities, the *Physics*, *On Generation and Corruption* and *Metaphysics* clearly go beyond the *Phaedo*, which remains silent on the subject of privation and other such Aristotelian concepts. The same holds for Aristotle's psychology, as Franco Trabattoni argues. In his lost dialogue *Eudemus*, Aristotle refutes the theory of the soul as *harmonia* by means of arguments inspired by the *Phaedo*. He does however add an argument of his own, which foreshadows the difference between substance and quality as it can be found in the *Categories*. The influence of the *Phaedo* on Aristotle cannot be ignored, although the Stagirite further elaborated on and perfected some of its arguments.

We also find traces of such a use in Stoic literature. As Francesca Alesse shows, the earliest surviving evidence of a Stoic reference to the *Phaedo* can

probably be traced back to the first generation—though heterodox—Stoic Aristo of Chios (3rd century BC), who seems to echo Socrates' comparison of *phronesis* with money (*Phd.* 69a) when formulating his own distinctive view on the unity and the exclusively intellectual character of virtue. As for Chrysippus, he seems rather to use symbols, themes and arguments from the *Phaedo* in what may be called a 'dialectical' way, i.e. in order to ground views which are sometimes radically alien, or even contrary, to Plato's. Examples of this attitude are Chrysippus' explicit reference to Socrates' affirmation of the inseparability of contraries (*Phd.* 60b–c) in the context of an explanation of the presence of evils in a world governed by divine providence, his use of the definition of death as a separation of soul and body (*Phd.* 64c) in order to prove that the soul must be corporeal, and perhaps also his invocation of Homeric verses that Plato treated as pointing to a separation of the functions of the soul, but Chrysippus used to show on the contrary that these functions are located in the same place. Alesse shows that in the imperial Stoa, references to the *Phaedo* became more frequent, as was to be expected in an age that saw the birth of a new form of dogmatic Platonism, usually called 'Middle Platonism'. Nevertheless, both Seneca (4 BC – 65 AD) and Epictetus (ca. 55–135 AD) focus on the moral teachings of the dialogue, with little or no consideration for the doctrinal and eschatological context in which they originally appeared. This is perfectly in line with their general approach to philosophy.

But of course, it is within the Platonic tradition that we find the most extensive philosophical use of the *Phaedo*. Platonists often pick up elements from the *Phaedo* and use them as building blocks in the elaboration of a systematic Platonic doctrine, thus pursuing or perfecting Plato's thought, at least from their point of view. We will concentrate on two main topics here: the late Neoplatonic interpretation of Forms, and that of the soul.

The *Phaedo* is of crucial importance for Syrianus' and Proclus' views on Forms and concept formation. Unlike most modern interpreters of the dialogue—but like most Platonists from Plotinus onwards—, Syrianus believes that the Forms referred to in the argument from recollection are not to be identified with properly intelligible Forms, but with forms that are present in the soul, i.e. the soul's proper objects of knowledge. As Pieter d'Hoine shows, the *Phaedo* is an important building block for the Neoplatonic doctrine of the psychic forms, which are identified with the essence of the soul, for their account of concept formation and for later Neoplatonic views on the intermediate ontological status of mathematical objects. The Form of Equal, which the Platonic Socrates uses as an example throughout the argument and of which he proves that it cannot derive from the perception of sensible equals but must be acquired from before birth, is taken by the Neoplatonic commentators to be a



mathematical form, thus testifying to the ontological priority of mathematical objects over sensible particulars. The gist of this argument can be found in Syrianus' comments on *Metaphysics* M, where it is developed as a criticism of Aristotle's views on mathematics and concept formation, but the same ideas recur in Proclus, Damascius, and Olympiodorus. Proclus also finds arguments in the *Phaedo* for distinguishing between the intelligible Forms and the forms immanent in sensible particulars. Discussing his interpretation of the argument from similarity, **Alain Lernould** argues that Proclus considers the six attributes of the soul at *Phd.* 80a10–b5 (discussed above) as six properties of intelligible reality, i.e. as attributes of the divine, that one must compare with the attributes of the body (human, mortal, unintelligible, multifarious, corruptible and subject to change), i.e. of immanent forms. If one combines these readings of Proclus and Syrianus, the *Phaedo* provides evidence for at least three of the levels of forms that the later Neoplatonists distinguished: apart from the Forms in Intellect, they also accepted discursive forms in the soul—which are images of the intelligible Forms—, and immanent forms in sensible particulars.

The dialogue was also a stimulus for the development of the late Platonists' views on the soul, as was to be expected. As we have seen (section 1 above), the Neoplatonists felt the need to respond to Strato's objections against the *Phaedo*'s last argument for the immortality of the soul. According to **Riccardo Chiaradonna**, it is probably because of these objections or related ones from the Peripatetic school that Plotinus does not hesitate to complete, to correct, and to reinforce Plato's argument. In an early treatise, *Ennead* IV 7 [2], Plotinus completes the argument by showing that the soul is essentially endowed not only with life, but also with being, with the result that Socrates' controversial conclusion, according to which the soul is both immortal (*Phd.* 105c–e) and imperishable (*Phd.* 106a–e), now seems better grounded. This also implies a major correction of Plato's argument, since Plotinus, unlike Plato, distinguishes the way life is present in the soul from the way heat is present in fire. Heat is present in fire as a quality in a material compound, fire being itself the compound of matter and heat. By contrast, life is purely and simply *identical* with the soul, which implies that, in the soul, being and life are the same. This relation between being and life is distinctive of the intelligible world, whose structure Plotinus will thoroughly explore in later treatises, and is therefore intimately connected to Plotinus' own distinct metaphysics. But there may be another reason for this reading of Plato's text: it can be interpreted as a reaction to Aristotle's position, according to which even if the soul is a life-principle, it may be reduced to the form or to the act of a material compound (just like heat in relation to fire). Plotinus, however, holds that the life of living organisms is derived from an original and non-corporeal principle, i.e. the soul in so

far as it is identical with life itself. Proclus and Damascius followed the same path in addressing Strato's attack, as **Sebastian Gertz** shows. By distinguishing the 'life-bringing' life that the soul possesses in itself (which is taken to be imperishable) from the life that the soul brings about in a substrate, i.e. the body (which will perish at a certain point), they argue that, unlike animated bodies, the soul is a separate substance that cannot suffer loss of life. Yet, as Gertz argues, Damascius was aware that this line of defence does not rule out the possibility that the soul may simply extinguish itself over time by virtue of its limited potency. Taking Strato's objections into account, he attempts to provide a number of additional proofs for the imperishability of the soul, based on assumptions that are implicit in the *Phaedo's* final argument (see *In Phd.* I 458–465). Gertz concludes, however, that they do not provide a convincing reply to the limited potency objection.

As the above suggests, Antiquity provides us with a large variety of approaches towards the *Phaedo*. As a dialogue, i.e. as a literary artefact, it has been a source of inspiration for later narrative patterns. As the story of Socrates' death, it has been read as a historical testimony. As a work by Plato, it has often been thought to convey some of Plato's most typical and influential doctrines. As a philosophical text, it was (and still is) considered as a stock of arguments to be discussed or refuted. At different moments and in different contexts, very different parts or aspects of the dialogue have attracted attention from its readers (as the *index locorum* will reveal, most parts of the dialogue are covered somehow in this volume). Depending on their own philosophical orientation, on their greater or lesser affinity with Platonism, on their particular interests in philosophy or beyond, or even on the way they wanted to position themselves within intra-school debates, different readers have provided a host of different perspectives on the *Phaedo*. These different readings of the dialogue no doubt tell us a great deal about the philosophical pursuits and aspirations of its readers. But they also testify to the richness of the text that gave rise to them. This is what makes the *Phaedo* a genuine classic of philosophical literature.

The idea of this book is anchored in a project—undertaken by the contact group '*Platon et la tradition platonicienne*', which was founded in 2012 and is supported by the *Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique* (FRS-FNRS)—to study the ancient Neoplatonic commentaries on Plato's *Phaedo*, thus continuing the seminal work conducted by L.G. Westerink in the 1970s. In order to get a grip on the exegetical tradition of the text, we felt the need for a conference on the history of *Phaedo* interpretations in Antiquity, focusing mainly on the period before Damascius and Olympiodorus. The conference was held on

8–10th October 2012 at the Royal Academy in Brussels. The papers collected in this volume were all read at the conference—except for the essay by Lorenzo Corti, who joined our working group in Liège for a special session devoted to Sextus Empiricus on 1st June, 2012. Since the organisation of this conference was vital to the project, we would like to thank the institutions that made it possible through their generous financial and logistical support. We have received much appreciated support from the *FNRS*, the *Académie Royale de Belgique*, the *De Wulf—Mansion Centre for Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy* at KU Leuven, the *Centre de recherche en philosophie de l'Université libre de Bruxelles* and the *Facultés de Philosophie et Lettres* of the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* and of the *Université de Liège*. Our thanks also go to Lorenzo Corti and the participants in the conference, on whom the success of the project has largely depended.<sup>3</sup>

---

3 The authors should like to thank Simon Fortier for his linguistic revision of this introduction, as well as an anonymous reader from the press for many acute suggestions for improvement of the manuscript.