A Fourth Way of Reading Plato's *Phaedo*

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The papers in this collection on *Phaedo*’s reception in antiquity were given at a conference held at the Royal Academy in Brussels in 2012. The volume becomes the fifth focused study on the reception of various Platonic dialogues, preceded by a study on the *Timaeus* (1999 and 2003, Reydams-Schils, ed.), the *Symposium* (2006, Lesher—Nails—Sheffield, eds.) the *Parmenides* (2010, Turner—Corrigan, eds.) and the *First Alcibiades* (2015, Renaud—Tarrant). The thirteen papers span chronologically from Aristotle to Simplicius, giving us a glimpse into the long, but for the most part, now lost exegetical tradition on this dialogue. Since the only extant commentaries are by Damascius (preserved as lecture notes in two versions) and Olympiodorus (see text in Westerink, 1976-77), four of the 13 papers (by Lernould, Gertz, Trabattoni and Demulder—Van Riel) discuss Damascius and two include Olympiodorus (by Lernould and Demulder—Van Riel). Thus, with Gerz’s earlier monograph (2011) focused mostly on the *Phaedo* commentaries of Damascius and Olympiodorus, those interested in the afterlife of this dialogue in Late Antiquity have access to a wealth of scholarly expertise. It is remarkable that the *Index Locorum* covers most of the dialogue since different parts of it attracted different readers at different times. There is no doubt that ‘these different readings of the dialogue … tell us a great deal about the philosophical pursuits and aspirations of its readers.’(15)

The book also contains an *Index Nominum* and *Index Rerum*.

The importance of the dialogue in Antiquity was that it ‘features 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.’(1) The introduction by Delcomminette, d’Hoine and Gavray ties the findings in the chronologically sequenced collection of papers together with a summary that shows how the dialogue was read 1) as a historical testimony about the story of Socrates 2) as a work by Plato conveying his most typical and influential doctrines and 3) as a philosophical text considered as a stock of arguments to be discussed and refuted.
The goal of this elaborate review and critical note is to register a fourth way of reading the dialogue, suggested by Plato himself in *Phd. 89A8*, namely as a protreptic.

After coming to the end of the volume, this reader was impressed with the breadth of receptions of the dialogue discussed in the papers and the cohesiveness of the volume despite the fact that it is a collection of symposium papers. I must note, however, that the balance is heavily tipped to the Neoplatonists after Plotinus (six out of the thirteen papers) which is understandable, given the state of the evidence. Also, one would have appreciated more space for Plotinus in whose *Enneads* explicit references to the *Phaedo* number around 100 while the implicit references could hardly be counted (154). The volume has one paper (by Chiaradonna) devoted to the reception of the *Phaedo* in Plotinus’ treatise *On the immortality of the soul* (iv.7 [2]). A conspicuous gap is the absence of Iamblichus, but more on that later.

Just as it is impossible to do justice to every aspect of *Phaedo’s* influence in antiquity, it is also impossible to do justice to the rich array of insights on offer in this volume. I will paint with a broad brush the merits of the book which is a must have for any serious student of the dialogue. The volume is of interest not just to those who wish to understand the development of philosophical exegesis in Antiquity, but also for those who value the unique insights and critical distance that the ancient readings of the dialogue have to offer to the modern commentator. I will survey the papers with an eye on the three attitudes to the *Phaedo* in Antiquity itself, as outlined in the introduction of the book. These attitudes were ‘exegesis, critical response, and appropriation.’ (3)

Creative appropriation is the most wide-spread approach to the reception of the dialogue, often combined with critical response or exegesis. Creative appropriation can be historical, literary or philosophical (11).

Delcomminette, in his paper *Aristote et le Phédon* highlights the paradox of Aristotle’ philosophical appropriation of the *Phaedo*: out of the seven mentions of the dialogue in the works of Aristotle, only one (*Phd 66b-67b*) appears in the *De Anima* (407b2-5) while the others refer to the ‘autobiography’ of Socrates, i.e. to the types of causes to which the ‘second sailing’ is directed (*Metaph 99b3, 108a2; De gen. et corr. 335b10 cf Phd 100b-102a*). The rest of the references are to the cosmology of the final myth (the explanation of the fixed earth (*Phd 109a*) at the center of the universe in *De Caelo* 295b11. Thus, Aristotle’s main interest in the dialogue concerns questions of the philosophy of nature (17).

Aristotle’s criticism of Plato for considering the Ideas sufficient to account for generation and corruption is well known. For him, these changes can be only explained with the efficient cause (30). The most valuable contribution
of D.’s paper is that it builds upon earlier work by Gerson (2005) and Shorey (1922) and opens our eyes to the enormity of the creative appropriation of the dialogue on Aristotle’s part, even when that debt is unacknowledged. The *Phaedo* is overtly or covertly present throughout the first chapter of Aristotle’s *Physics* (24). The Stagirite’s theory of change and causes in *Physics* 1.5 rests upon the *Phaedo’s* formulation of change as taking place between contraries (103 b-c). Even the order of the ‘history of philosophy’ in *Metaphysics* A can be traced to the *Phaedo* (12).

After Aristotle, ‘Plato’s *Phaedo* became a perennial target of criticism within the Peripatetic school’ (3). The most famous representative of this tradition of criticism is Strato of Lampsacus, head of the Lyceum from 287 to 269 BCE. Therefore, Baltussen’s paper on *Strato of Lampsacus as a Reader of Plato’s Phedo: His Critique of the Soul’s Immortality* is a logical sequel to the previous paper on Aristotle. The evidence, however, is fragmentary and second-hand because Strato’s objections are only preserved in the sixth century commentary on the *Phaedo* attributed to Damascius.

B. sets out to examine the immediate context of the fragments in Damascius’ text and to reconstruct the intellectual context of Stato (i.e. his Peripatetic background). (37) This method produces a very nuanced picture, a significant improvement upon earlier readings that privileged either Strato’s point of view or Damascius’ point of view. B. proposes a synthesis as he engages critically Repici’s (2011) uneven treatment of the *aporiai*, and incorporates Modrak’s (2011) ‘persuasive interpretation of Strato’s physicalist theory of psychology’ while reinforcing Gertz’s comments on Damascius’ refutation of Strato (61). In contextualizing Strato, B. makes up for the previously missed opportunity to ‘determine the dialectical nature of the *aporiai* with appropriate and direct reference to Aristotle’s dialectic.’ (52)

The greatest strength of the paper is its razor sharp honesty in assessing the limits of the source materials and the complexity of their philosophical entanglements. (61) Despite the extreme caution of his approach, B. successfully shows that Strato’s criticisms of the *Phaedo*, presented as a series of puzzles or *aporiai* were taken very seriously in both the Aristotelian and Platonic traditions.

Criticism and creative historical appropriation coexist in the Hellenistic and post-hellenistic Stoic receptions of the *Phaedo*, centering on the theme of the relationship between body and soul and the concept of the separation between the two (65, 89) as shown by Alesse. She tackles the difficult history of the Stoic reception of the dialogue starting with Ariston of Chios. We already know from Bénatouil (2006.95) that Ariston’s theory of the unity of virtues was based upon Socrates’ comparison of *phronesis* with coinage (67, cf *Phd* 69a),
but she moves the discussion forward by stating that Ariston’s view of the unity of virtues is completely unique to him (according to Plutarch) and it is precisely the monetary imagery from the *Phaedo* that aids Ariston in formulating the unity of virtue with its different manifestations in regard to different circumstances.

Next is Chrysippus who ‘makes use of symbols, of themes and arguments from the dialogue to support the positions of his school, positions opposed to Platonism.’ (73) Panaetius of Rhodes allegedly athetised the dialogue. With Fabricius, A. does not believe that Panaetius really athetised it, but argues convincingly that Panaetius’ doubts about the authenticity of the dialogues of Phaedo of Elis was wrongly transferred to the Platonic dialogue bearing Phaedo’s name. (81)

Finally, she looks at Seneca’s (primarily from Letter 65) and Epictetus’ creative appropriation of the dialogue, at how they side-step its metaphysical and eschatological aspects and how they transform them into moral ones while making full use of the animal and divine natures in man, of the image of the body as prison or as a chain for the soul (86) and of the Socratic ‘care for the soul’ (88).

Posidonius is conspicuously absent, A. points out, from this reception history, but Seneca may have been aware of the two Ciceronian references (*Tusc. II 79* and *Somn. Scipionis* 14; 26; 29) to the dialogue, which, in turn, may point to Posidonius. A reevaluation of the sources of Latin Stoicism would be needed to say something about that (89), a thought-provoking conclusion that paves the way to further research on the reception of this dialogue. Alesse shows that from the surveyed 400 years of Stoic reception of the dialogue, references to it are most frequent in the imperial Stoa. Of course, this could be an optical illusion due to the state of the extant evidence.

Corti, in his paper *Sextus, the Number Two and the Phaedo* discusses Sextus’ use of some puzzles raised in Socrates’ so-called autobiography (*Phd 96e-97b*) against the dogmatic notion of the number two. This paper, devoted to a critical reception of the *Phaedo* is important in that it shows 1. the popularity of the dialogue outside the framework of official Platonism (5) and 2. the barren sophistry of the argument that plays with the impossibility of the existence of number two, for which Sextus argues in 9 steps (93) while completely ignoring Plato’s own solution to the paradox through the Form of twoness (*Phd 101 b-c*). Corti’s paper comprehensively assesses Sextus’s critical reception of the dialogue in the context of what Sextus presents as Pythagorean doctrine in his *Against the Arithmeticians* and *Against the Physicists* (91). Since before Burkert (1972) Sextus used to be counted among the important later sources for Pythagoreanism, this reader would have expected from this paper some
discussion of Sextus’ reception of the *Phaedo* in the context of his reception of Pythagoreanism.

Roskam in *Plutarch’s Reception of Plato’s Phaedo* contextualizes the literary or rhetorical reception of the *Phaedo* by comparison to the reception of other Platonic dialogues since most of them are mentioned or alluded to in the corpus of the omnivorous reader Plutarch. The problem with tracing the influence of the *Phaedo* on the philosopher from Chaeronea is that many passages from his works ‘show only a fairly vague or superficial correspondence with a specific passage from a Platonic dialogue’ (111), so R. proposes an updated list consisting of 16 *Phaedo* passages where Plato’s influence is clear.

Contrary to what one may expect, reference to the dialogue is absent from Plutarch’s *Consolatio ad uxorem* and is not well represented even in the works where eschatological myths are present (112). At the same time, it unexpectedly shows up in works like *De sollertia animalium* where a verbatim quotation from the *Phaedo* provides an argument in favor of the mantic power of birds. He quotes the narrative sections of the dialogue the most (113) and the subtlety with which he references them shows that he knew the dialogue in great detail (115), perhaps even by heart (116).

We are already in the territory of exegesis combined with historical appropriation in Tarrant’s paper on *The Phaedo in Numenian Allegorical Interpretation*. The relevant materials are available through Porphyry (134). Tarrant starts, however, with Plutarch, thus creating a seamless continuity with the previous paper which notes (130) just as Tarrant does (136) Plutarch’s non-dogmatic approach to Plato’s doctrines on metempsychosis, on the immortality of the soul and to his myths.

T. briefly discusses Albinus’ pedagogical use of the *Phaedo* and Alcinous’ discussion of the *Phaedo*’s final argument for the immortality of the soul before moving on to Numenius. For him, the prison of desire from which Socrates saves himself and others including *Phaedo* himself who was a sex slave before being rescued by Socrates, is the central focus of Numenius’ appropriation, just as it is for the Stoics (cf. 86). T. rightly argues that Numenius’ symbolic interpretation of the True Earth in the *Phaedo*, of the *Phaedo*’s prison, of transmigration into animal bodies all have a lot to teach the modern reader and critic of the dialogue (153). The Orphic and Pythagorean connections to the *Phaedo* are relevant to the understanding of Numenius’ reception. All these threads are masterfully woven together in T.’s excellent overview of *Phaedo*’s reception in the 2nd AD.

Chiaradonna’s paper on Plotinus as reader of the *Phaedo: soul and life in IV 7[2] n* is also seamlessly connected to the earlier paper by Baltussen about
Strato’s objections against the last argument for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*. In response to these criticisms, Plotinus corrects, completes and reinforces Plato’s argument by showing that the soul is endowed not just with life, but also with being and that in the soul, life and being are the same. (14; 162-167) It is specifically the relation of soul/life to fire/warmth (Enn. IV 7[2] 11.3-9] that can be perceived as a response to Strato (172). Therefore, C. conjectures that the later Neoplatonists used the sections of the *Enneads*, discussed in this paper in confronting the peripatetic criticisms of the *Phaedo* (171).

The later Neoplatonists will dominate the rest of the volume, but Ch. has accomplished the daunting feat of giving the reader some sense of Plotinus’ indebtedness to the *Phaedo* as well as of his selective use of the dialogue, his deployment of paraphrase, of metaphorical interpretation, often citing the work in defense of a position different or even opposed to a cited passage.

Each of the five proofs for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo* (from contraries 69e6ff, from recollection 72e3ff, from similarity 78b4ff, from harmony 85b10ff and the final argument on the essence of soul 95e7ff) receives detailed attention in the next four papers.

D’Hoine’s piece on *Syrianus and the Phaedo* studies Syrianus’ *monobiblos* on the argument from opposites (*Phd*. 69e-72d) as quoted in Damascius and Olympiodorus. D’H. shows how seriously Damascius took Syrianus’ interpretation of the argument from opposites and how important the recollection argument was for later Neoplatonic mathematical doctrine, an importance that may have even antedated Syrianus. (211) The contemporary reader interested in the argumentative structure of the dialogue will find that Syrianus has important insights to offer about the relationship between the different proofs for the immortality of the soul. He was ‘the first attested reader of the *Phaedo* who considered it to be a genuine dialogue, i.e. a discussion that proceeds progressively’ (186) towards the final argument which he considered to be the only conclusive one. D’H. does not think that Syrianus authored a commentary on all of the *Phaedo*, but perhaps he used Plutarch’s which may have circulated in his school. The fact that the question of whether Syrianus authored a full commentary on the *Phaedo* cannot be conclusively resolved reminds us of the extremely ‘fluid relationship between oral teaching and written publication’ (178) in this period.

The argument from similarity takes front stage in Lernould’s paper on *Damascius, Olympiodorus and Proclus on the attributes ‘divine’ and ‘intelligible’ in Phaedo 80aa0-b1 in the argument called ‘from similarity’*. L. compares the argument ‘from similarity’ in the two extant commentaries by Damascius and Olympiodorus with Proclus’ use of it in the first book of his *Platonic Theology*. 
He convincingly demonstrates that these commentaries can only be understood in light of the complex ontological hierarchies in later Neoplatonism, illustrated in the helpful appendix that appears at the end of the article.

The final argument for the immortality of the soul is the focus of Gertz’s article From ‘Immortal’ to ‘Imperishable’: Damascius on the Final Argument in Plato’s Phaedo. Gertz, pace Westerink, accepts the fact that Damascius sided with Strato and Cebes in their attack on the final argument since he ‘failed to find anything like a convincing reply’ to it in Damascius. This is a tribute to Damascius’ ‘intellectual honesty.’ (255) This reader would have expected more of a dialogue between this paper and the one by Baltussen. The conclusion of Gertz’s paper leaves us with an impression of Damascius’ impotence before Strato’s attack on the final argument, but perhaps Damascius’ ‘intellectual honesty’ resided in realizing the value of having one’s assumptions exposed despite the fact that a ‘shrewd argument’ capable of exposing those assumptions ‘bites deepest.’ (Damascius, Soph. Ref. 182b32-33 in Baltussen 60) Those assumptions rest upon the ambiguity of words like ‘deathless’ (Baltussen 56-60). Since Damascius was addressing an audience of ‘philosophical initiates’ (Demulder and Van Riel 291), perhaps his advanced philosophers had the maturity to accept the fact that one of the most basic tenets of Platonism, that of the soul’s immortality could not be proven in an argumentative way, but had to be experienced in the epopteia of the philosophical bacchant.

Trabattoni’s Theory of the soul-harmony among the ancient commentators concludes the series of 4 papers on the 5 arguments about the immortality of the soul. T. shows how Damascius and Philoponus try to read into the Phaedo Aristotle’s category argument from the end of the Eudemus (soul is substance; harmony is a quality) and in the process they see the goal of Aristotle in the Eudemus as being at odds with his goal in the De Anima: in the former, Aristotle sees the soul as a substance in the strongest sense of the term, but not so in the latter (286). The paper is of interest in that it shows how the peripatetic views on the soul developed in a way parallel to the views about the Forms and how the acceptance of the doctrine of the soul as harmony led some Aristotelians like Aristoxenus and Dicearchus to the extreme view of rejecting even the existence of soul (269).

Demulder and Van Riel in ‘Many are the thyrsus bearers, but the Bacchants are few’: Olympiodorus and Damascius on the Phaedo demonstrate that Olympiodorus’ toned down Platonism and ‘compromise-philosophy’ was due not so much to Christian pressures in Alexandria, but to the fact that Olympiodorus’ audience consisted in trainees for public service and in a general interested audience which was not set on attaining the pinnacle of purifica-
tion. By contrast, Damascius had a committed audience eager to attain the highest state of the philosophical bacchant.

The last paper by Gavray, *Au terme d'une tradition: Simplicius, lecteur du Phédon* is about the original elements in Simplicius’ exegesis of the *Phaedo* and the elements that he has inherited from Damascius’ reception of the dialogue. His originality consists in harmonizing Plato and Aristotle by cross-pollinating the sources he uses. Simplicius quotes the *Phaedo* the least, compared to other dialogues of Plato. He follows Damascius when he makes the mistake of attributing a passage from the myth of the True Earth in the *Phaedo* (109A4) to the *Timaeus*. This ‘mistake’ allows him to harmonize Plato (108e5-109a2) with Aristotle’s view of the central position of the Earth in the heavens (*De Caelo* 295a10 ff). He even inserts non-existent elements into Plato’s myth in the *Phaedo* to synchronize it better not only with the *Timaeus*, but also with Aristotle’s *De Caelo* and to demonstrate that Plato’s myth is more theological than Aristotle’s empirical cosmology with which it is nevertheless in perfect harmony.

Gavray’s paper which is essentially about Simplicius’ reception of Damascius’ reception of the *Phaedo* reminds us that reception snowballs into further receptions that unfold to our own time and perhaps this volume will lead to another volume that would explore the more recent receptions of the dialogue.

In conclusion, I must speak of a significant gap in this collection. Iamblichus is not listed in the *Index Locorum* and there is no mention of the five fragments of his commentary on the *Phaedo* (Dillon 1973; 2009). The Neoplatonic curriculum which received its highly influential form from Iamblichus in the 3-4th century, prevailed until the 6th century (Introduction 6). From Iamblichus on, each dialogue in the curriculum addressed a specific virtue and goal (*skopos*) and the *Phaedo*’s role was introduction to the cathartic virtues, a pedagogical arrangement that remains intact both in Damascius and Simplicius (Gavray 294-5). Along with Syrianus, Iamblichus was the greatest authority for Damascius and Olympiodorus on the cyclical argument for the immortality of the soul (D’Hoine 195). However, while Syrianus did not author a commentary on the dialogue (cf. D’Hoine 179), Iamblichus did. Therefore, he would have deserved a chapter in this volume especially since his style of commentary became the benchmark for the commentaries written after him.

Iamblichus made the dialogue part of his introductory course on Plato, placing it third after the *First Alcibides* and the *Gorgias*. This means that he saw it primarily as a powerful protreptic. Indeed he paraphrased *Phaedo* 64E-65D over the span of 6 pages in his *Protrepticus* (ed. Pistelli 61.7-67,16. cf. Chroust (2015) v.2 352). A scholarly edition of the *Protrepticus* is in the works in a forthcoming edition by D.S. Hutchinson and M.R. Johnson.
In a volume like this, some attention to the protreptic use of the dialogue and to the reading of the dialogue as a protreptic would have balanced the focus on the analytical battles over Socrates’ five proofs for the immortality of the soul. Although the *Phaedo* had a central place in the Platonic curriculum even before Iamblichus (Tarrant 137), it is through his *Protrepticus* that we become aware of the importance of this dialogue for the protreptic genre. After all, so much of this genre is lost to us. Iamblichus’ *Protrepticus* may be a patchwork (Merlan 1953.193, cf Collins II 2015.205), but because it is preserved, we become aware of a tradition in the dialogue’s reception that took seriously the mention of *protrepō* in the frame narrative when Echecrates interrupts Phaedo right after he reports how Cebes criticized Socrates’ proof of the soul’s immortality from harmony.

The interruption of the dialogue itself in order to return to the narrative frame is very rare in Plato’s dialogues, but it happens twice in the *Phaedo* (Collins II 1915.126). Both extradiagnostic interruptions are about the reception of the dialogue. We learn what the reaction to the dialogue of those who were in Socrates’ presence was. In the first interruption, we learn that Socrates responded to the criticisms of the young men ‘in a sweet, kind and respectful manner’, he was very sensitive to the way in which they received his words, he skillfully healed them, recalled them from their flight and sense of defeat and brought about a reversal in them (προύτρεψεν *Phd.* 89A8), enticing them to follow him and examine with him the reasoning behind the argument.

Plato was so anxious to describe the reactions of the first receiver of the dialogue, of Echecrates listening to Phaedo’s account that at the end of the ‘second sailing’ he returns to the narrative frame for a second time in order to allow us to hear Echecrates say, ‘it seems to me that he spoke all these things in a way that was amazingly clear to anyone who has even a little bit of sense (*nous*) … and [it is amazingly clear] even to those of us who were absent, but are hearing it now.’ (102A)

Plato evidently wanted to influence somewhat the reception of this dialogue through these extensive extradiagnostic interruptions. Through his choice of vocabulary in the framing narrative, he strongly suggests that the dialogue was first received as an effective protreptic. It is logical therefore that Iamblichus used it so extensively in his *Protrepticus*. After all, it was the death of Socrates that inspired the genre of the Socratic dialogue that in turn gave birth to the Platonic tradition. It was the Platonic dialogue that gave this millennium-long living philosophical tradition in antiquity its coherence and sustenance. And out of all the dialogues, it was the joy and courage with which Socrates faced his death in the *Phaedo* that rippled throughout the centuries as
the most persuasive force behind the arguments for anyone with ‘even a little bit of sense.’

This omission certainly does not distract in any way from the usefulness of this thoughtfully edited volume. Its editors deserve special kudos for producing such a rich, well-organized and thought-provoking collection of the finest scholarship on the topic.

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