CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER DEATH: THE PHAEDO MYTH
AND ITS NEOPLATONIC INTERPRETERS

1. Preliminaries

With the case for immortality concluded, Socrates returns to a conviction he had voiced at the beginning of the dialogue: after death, there is a better future for the good than for the wicked (Phd. 63c). The doctrine of immortality, in other words, is not merely a neutral and reasonable assertion of an ontological fact, but closely tied up with the belief that a providential order will punish wickedness and reward virtue. Thus, Socrates frames his afterlife account with some comments that drive home the importance of the soul’s ‘education and nurture’ for the life to come (107c1–d5; 114d1–115a2). If dying amounted to the soul’s complete separation from everything, it would be a ‘godsend’ for the wicked, because they would escape their own vice effortlessly upon death. For this reason, Socrates urges that there are afterlife destinations that accord with the way each soul has lived its past embodied life. Although Socrates warns us not to expect an exact account of these destinations, we can be confident that the truth about our souls and their fate after death is ‘either this or something like this’ (ἢ ταῦτ᾽ ἐστὶν ἢ τοιοῦτον; 114d2–3).

It is in this final section of the Phaedo, then, that the two main themes of Plato’s dialogue and the present study, death and immortality, are most clearly brought together. The central interpretative question is not, I think, what the overall purpose of the myth within the dialogue is, since Socrates himself is quite explicit on this point. By repeating to ourselves ‘like a spell’ (114d6) what happens to our souls after death, we can become confident that practising death in the philosopher’s manner will reap rich rewards.

More difficult to pin down are the parts of the Phaedo myth that are ‘mythical’ (in the sense that we should not believe them to be exactly like this), and those parts that can be taken as philosophically or scientifically true. If we take a closer look at the structure of Socrates’ narrative from 107c1 onwards, it seems difficult to single out one individual part
of it as ‘mythical’. The myth is introduced with the tale of an afterlife journey, the source of which is left deliberately vague by Socrates (cf. λέγεται; 107d5), although he hints at its provenance from ‘rites and observances’. Souls are guided by a spirit to some unspecified place of judgment, from which they proceed to Hades, to be reborn again after long periods of time. Virtuous souls follow their guide willingly and find the region that belongs to them, while wicked souls wander along in confusion and isolation. The next part of the myth is ostensibly designed to give a more detailed account of the regions to which souls travel, but in fact provides a much more general account of the earth’s shape, position, stability and size before turning to its lower and upper regions (108d–110b). The ‘true earth’ is situated in the ether, and we live in one of the earth’s hollows. Only at 110b1, when he turns to describing the beauty of the ‘true earth’ in more detail, does Socrates use the word mythos. There follows a theory of the earth’s hollows, with which it is pierced through and which constitute an intricate network that explains the flow of underground rivers from and into Tartarus. The most important rivers are Oceanus, Achæron, Pyriphlegethon and Cocytus (111c–113c), which lead to different places of punishment: those of mediocre disposition go to the Acherusian lake (113d–e), those who are incurably wicked to Tartarus ‘from which they never emerge’ (113e), and those who have committed great errors to Tartarus via Cocytus or Pyriphlegethon depending on their misdeeds, with a prospect of redemption should they gain their victims’ forgiveness (114a–b). Once souls are purified, they move up to dwell on the earth, from where they may rise again to even more ‘beautiful abodes’ (114c).

On the face of it, only the description of the true earth at 110b is explicitly introduced as a mythos, but what about the preceding theory of the earth and its regions or the subsequent theory of hollows? Are these parts to be taken as good natural philosophy that has to be supplemented with a mythical account where reality is beyond the reach of our senses and conjectures (i.e. the nature of the true earth in the ether)? And why does Socrates blend truth and fiction, science and religion in such a peculiar way?

The aim of this chapter will be to approach the place and function of the dialogue’s myth through the eyes of the Neoplatonic commentators on the Phaedo.1 The notes from Damascius’ Commentaries on the Phaedo

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1 Some important studies on the Phaedo myth are Sedley (1990); Ebert (2002). An insightful critique of Plato’s afterlife myths in the Gorgias, the Phaedo and the Republic.