COLLOQUIUM 1

MISIOLOGY AND TRUTH

RAPHAEL WOOLF

ABSTRACT

In Plato’s *Phaedo*, Socrates warns against the dangers of ‘misology,’ or hatred of argument, claiming that it threatens to deprive us of truth and knowledge. In the same passage he tells us that the mark of the philosopher is to care above all for the truth. His remarks invite us to ask why we should care about the truth. The *Phaedo* proposes that truth can be valued either for its practical utility or because it has a content worthy of engaging us. Neither model recognises truth for its own sake as a goal, despite its apparent status as the philosopher’s special interest. How, then, should we value truth? In what ways can a concern for truth motivate enquiry? And what is the relation between the search for truth and the beliefs we are especially committed to? The *Phaedo*, I argue, both raises and offers a framework for exploring these questions.

What is the value of truth? The question may be an intriguing one, but posed thus starkly does not seem particularly amenable to an answer. I want to make things slightly more tractable by considering one text in particular which, I think, both poses and reflects on the question. In so doing, it offers some concrete ways of thinking about how we may value truth, thereby providing, if not a definitive answer, then at least a framework for further enquiry. The text I have in mind is Plato’s *Phaedo*, with special (though not exclusive) reference therein to Socrates’ discussion of ‘misology,’ or hatred of argument, at 89d-90d.

I want to suggest that there are at least two ways in which the dialogue proposes that truth may be valued: (1) for its practical utility, or (2) because its content expresses a state of affairs that we value. Position (1) belongs to Simmias, while (2) more closely resembles a position that can be attributed to Socrates. What I want to argue is that, as set out, neither of these models recognises a third possibility, namely truth for its own sake as a goal. Rather obviously, this is the case with a position like that of Simmias. But the point is applicable to Socrates’ outlook as well. For he acknowledges, in effect, that he will fight to defend the thesis of the soul’s immortality not out of a love of truth for its own sake but because of the value he places on the state of affairs that would obtain if the thesis were true. The truth is as it may be; and it may not coincide with the outcomes we are most invested in. In battling to make these two elements coincide, Socrates invites us to wonder where his deepest allegiance lies.
I think that the richness of the *Phaedo*’s stance on truth has been insuffi-
ciently recognised. Pursuit of truth for its own sake certainly has some
presence in the dialogue—it is, after all, what philosophers are (or should
be) engaged in. But even on the *Phaedo*’s own terms it is a radical notion.
Being a philosopher is hard; and reflection on some of the dialogue’s al-
ternative approaches to the value of truth may help us understand why.

I

As is well-known, in the *Phaedo* Socrates attempts to prove that the soul is
immortal. But by 88c his efforts look to be in some difficulty, and indeed a
point of crisis has been reached. His main interlocutors, Simmias and Ce-
bes, have each issued stern challenges. Simmias has proposed that the soul
is a kind of harmony or attunement of the elements of the body, which,
though beautiful and incorporeal, will be dissolved on death. Cebes has
argued that even if the soul does outlive a particular body, as a weaver
may outlast a particular cloak, it may yet not be strong enough to outlive
all the bodies it might successively occupy. Perhaps the soul that occupies
my body has been so worn out by its various incarnations that it is due for
destruction when I die.

Phaedo, the dialogue’s narrator, then breaks off to tell Echecrates (to
whom he is reporting Socrates’ final hours) of the despondency that
gripped the audience at this point. But he makes it clear that in fact Socra-
etes succeeded in rallying his companions and managed to re-establish his
case for the soul’s immortality. A large portion of the remainder of the
dialogue is devoted to showing how he did this—against Simmias by a
direct refutation of his theory and against Cebes via what has become
known as the Final Argument.

But Socrates’ first move is to issue a warning against what he calls ‘mi-
sology,’ the hatred of argument. He claims that this arises when one lacks
skill (πειραμάτης) concerning argument (λόγος); and this in turn seems to mean
a propensity to put too much trust in the truth of particular arguments, just
as misanthropy (according to Socrates’ own analogy, 89d-90b) is caused
by excessive trust in people’s character. Thus an accumulation of disap-
pointments, in which those considered particularly close and reliable turn
out to be dubious, may lead one to trust nobody. So too an overly credu-
lous attitude towards argument may lead one to consider no argument at
all to be reliable and even to conclude that there is no determinate reality,
no fact of the matter about anything (90b-d).

Is it precisely arguments that the misologist comes to hate? One might
wonder whether ‘argument’ (rather than an alternative such as ‘theory’) is