

VIII: 2011 nr 2  
**Krakowskie  
Studia  
Międzynarodowe**

Catherine H. Zuckert

### MUSINGS ON MORTALITY

Death is a pervasive fact of human existence that both unites and divides us. The rational capacity that distinguishes human beings from other animals allows us to know—in a way more instinctively regulated creatures apparently do not, that we are going to die—and thus to take measure to forestall the inevitable. Many more human beings now live, on the average, much longer, than they did in the past—and yet, we still know, even better, if possible, that we are all going to die eventually, later if not sooner. The question thus arises, how do we live in the face of that fact—and, how should we?

The fact of human death is, indeed, rather peculiar, if not singular. We all know that all human beings are going to die—that's why we also call ourselves "mortals." The experience thus seems to be as general (and involuntary) as breathing. Everyone is going to die; everyone is the past has died. And yet, no one really knows what death is—or is like, because no one comes back, so to speak, to tell us. There is no one, therefore, truly to empathize, to sympathize with, or to share the experience of someone who is dying. No one else has the relevant experience or really knows what the dying person is going through. Although we all die—it is a universal fact of life on earth—Ernest Hemingway thus declared, we all die alone. One, if not the most general experience of living things thus also appears to be the most singular.

Religious people tend to answer the question, how do we live in the face of death, by orienting themselves by what they believe they know about the afterlife—salvation, eternal life, joy, rewards, damnation, punishment or nirvana. Because we cannot know on the basis of our own natural faculties, what, if anything

follows death, however, those who seek—or simply find it necessary in the absence of faith or grace—to direct their lives solely on the basis of reason think about our inevitable death not in terms of what may or may not come after. We do not and cannot know that. Such people, philosophers first and foremost, think about death by asking, how does human foreknowledge of the inevitable, inescapable end of our earthly existence affect our life or existence here and now? How should it?

I propose to reflect—or muse—on the two, in many ways diametrically opposed answers given to these questions at the beginning—and at the purported end—of the history of philosophy in the West. Those answers were given, in the first place, by Plato, and in the second, by Martin Heidegger. I begin, perhaps counter-intuitively, with the end—or, at least the purported in end—in the thought of Martin Heidegger.

Heidegger is infamous because of his Nazi connections. He was never a racist or an anti-Semite of the kind to be found at party headquarters, but he was a member of the party and spoke long after the defeat of Germany in World War II of “the essential truth of National Socialism.” Despite the death camps, Heidegger’s politics are not nearly as relevant to our “musings” about mortality as his role in founding what came to be called “existentialism.” Jean Paul Sartre popularized “existential angst” after the war, but he learned about “existential angst” and its significance before the war from Heidegger.

What then is—or did Heidegger argue was—the significance of “existential angst”? In *Being and Time* Heidegger argued, human beings are not the isolated “individuals,” “consciousnesses,” or autonomous subjects they had been said to be in earlier modern philosophy—be that Cartesian idealism, Lockean empiricism or Kantian critique. On the contrary, Heidegger observed, human existence or “dasein” involves not merely the awareness, but the fact of living in a “world,” that is, in the midst of a set of “things” which are related to each other as well as to us, primarily, but not exclusively in terms of their use, as well as, even more importantly, other people, from whom we learn about ourselves as well as about the world, first and foremost by learning a language. Precisely because we learn to think about ourselves, our lives, and our surroundings, primarily in terms or words taken from others, however, there is something external, acquired, conventional or, in Heidegger’s own terms “inauthentic” about the self-understanding we develop—perhaps I should say absorb—in this way. But, Heidegger also pointed out, individuals can come to a better, less conventional, less externally imposed or socially conformist understanding of themselves, if they reflect on the meaning and basis of a certain mood into which most, if not all of us inexplicably fall upon occasion. That mood is anxiety or, in German, *angst*. It is properly called “existential angst,” because it turns out to be, at bottom, not merely anxiety about our existence, but anxiety that is a necessary part or aspect of our existence. Heidegger explains: Anxiety or angst is not the same as fear. Fear has a specific object, e.g., the fear of violent death, as in Hobbes, or the fear of flying (which is obviously related, but not the same as

fear of death), fear of humiliation or fear of pain. Anxiety has no specific object; it is “uncanny” or strange and certainly uncomfortable, precisely because it does not appear to have a discernible, specific cause. Why then do we feel anxious—if there is no particular cause? If human beings reflect on the reason why we become anxious—for no specific reason or cause, in the absence of any determined threat to our existence or of pain—Heidegger suggests, we come to see something very important and true about our existence. It is not necessary. We could—people do, in fact—die unexpectedly and inexplicably, from natural as well as accidental causes, at any moment. A car crash could crash into us, a ceiling fall, we could trip and hit our head on the concrete sidewalk, and so on. Our generalized anxiety is a reflection of the fundamentally, truly uncertain character of our existence. The non-necessary character of our existence does not lie merely in the fact that our existence can end, unexpectedly at any moment, moreover. Once we become aware, as we usually are not aware, that our life or existence is not necessary, we also become aware, if we analyze the reasons why we continue to live, that we continue to live solely as a matter of our own choice. We do not have to—even if most of the time we are not aware of, or do not choose to think about the non-necessity of our own existence. We could choose not to live. Human beings can (and, unfortunately, at our time and place a regrettable number of young people do) choose to commit suicide. Even short of committing suicide, however, we recognize that we would slowly expire, if we did not act positively and intentionally—by eating, for example—to prolong our existence. Such actions do not guarantee that we will continue to live, of course. We cannot remove the fundamental uncertainty of or in our lives merely by acting so as to preserve them. We choose, indeed, to act to preserve them—in the face of this fundamental uncertainty. But, Heidegger emphasizes, if we analyze the causes of the generalized, indeterminate anxiety we sometimes feel, we will recognize not merely that our existence is uncertain, even precarious. If we face the ever-present possibility of our own death, instead of running away from this inescapable truth, by seeking security—in God, country or the acquisition of wealth—we will see and be able to affirm our own existence as a result of our own free choice. Our lives are not simply or fundamentally necessary, externally determined or “fated.” We can and must take responsibility for ourselves.

To say that our life or existence is the result of our own choice is NOT to say that we have the ability to choose whatever way of life we might imagine or like. Heidegger is NOT a liberal—classical or other. The life we choose to live—or not—is the life into which we have been thrown—born from parents we did not choose into circumstances, time and place, over which we had no control, and with respect to time, at least, that we cannot change. We choose to continue living, as who we are, not merely in the face of, but into an uncertain future. Our existence will, therefore, inevitably change, but we will not be able to control the way or direction of the change either. The existence we choose and affirm is our own particular, historically determined existence, but it is not simply ours as individuals. As you

may recall, I began by emphasizing Heidegger's critique of modern individualism or subjectivism. The life we discover is not necessary, but persists, consciously or unconsciously, because we choose it, is life in a "world" of useful things we share with other people who speak the same language and thus share the same understanding of their own place, life and times. In his early works, Heidegger argued that the choice, not merely to live, but to project one's own existence into the unknown and hence necessarily uncertain future required "resolution" and courage. Later, he emphasized not only the acceptance or choice, but also the cherishing of our lives, and thus of all the things that make up the world in which we find ourselves. Since nothing in this world necessarily exists, it continues to exist only and so long as we care for it. Recognizing the essentially transitory character of all worldly existence does not necessarily produce dejection, despair, hopelessness or melancholy. On the contrary, a true confrontation with the fact of the ever-present possibility of our inescapable death shows us that our continued existence is a product of our own free choice. It thus allows us not merely to affirm our existence as freely chosen but to understand that we can perpetuate this existence, our world, only by caring for it. It does not occur or persist on its own. Facing the necessity of death thus heightens our appreciation of life—even if that appreciation and care is momentary, even if we "fall" back into our ordinary, everyday fears of losing everything.

There is something appealing, I think, about the notion that we ought to cherish everything, recognizing that nothing will continue to exist if we do not care for it. This notion has or at least may have something in common with the belief that we ought to respect and care for everything in the world, because it is God's creation. There is, however, a fundamental difference. In Heidegger the 'care' is explicitly based on the recognition that there is nothing eternal. What has been called the "radical historicism" of Heidegger, that is, the contention that there is nothing eternal, including pre-eminently this and all other truth, as well as the problematic political associations, if not consequences, strictly speaking, of Heidegger's thought—the resolute self-assertion of nation as well as university he called for early on, and the apparent passivity of "Gelassenheit," or "letting things be" in his more poetic later works—should make us look for an alternative understanding of the significance of the distinctively human foresight into the fact of our impending death. We find such an alternative, I shall argue, at the beginning of the history of philosophy which Heidegger proclaims has ended in the works of Plato.

Unlike Heidegger—and, indeed, virtually all other philosophers, Plato did not write arguments, essays or books in his own name. Instead, he composed "dialogues" which are prose dramas; they have characters who speak to each other as well as settings and even, one might say, plots—although the action is usually not very dramatic. Because the interlocutors often respond to the leading speaker, usually Socrates, by saying, yes, no, so it seems, certainly, or probably, some impatient readers have gone so far as to declare that the dialogues are boring. What didn't Plato just come out and say what was on his mind? Why did he force his readers to

listen to an older, more philosophical character—usually named Socrates—lead or refute others? I won't be trying to answer that particular question in this brief essay, although it is a very important one. Instead, I will simply remind you that in most of his dialogues Plato shows a man named Socrates questioning others. In the most famous and arguably most dramatic of those dialogues Plato reports what Socrates said—first when he was on trial for his life and convicted of a capital crime, then when he was offered and refused an opportunity to escape, and finally on the day he knew that he was going to die. Upon another occasion I would contend, rather strongly, that it would be a mistake to regard these dialogues merely as historical reports. Here I will content myself merely with observing that, whether these accounts are strictly historical or partially literary invention, Plato pretty clearly presents Socrates' conduct in the face of his certain death as exemplary. The question is, exemplary of what?

In the *Apology* Socrates begins his defense speech by emphasizing his own inexperience speaking in court before a large group of people. He is making the speech, he says, because it is required by law. He does not expect to be able to convince the jurors of his innocence and to vote to acquit him, because there is a widespread prejudice against philosophy that has been applied, if inaccurately and unjustly to him. In the *Apology* Socrates thus emphasizes, he was a law-abiding citizen who did not take part in public debates or politics as it is usually understood, because he thought it would be dangerous. There is one exception to his law-abidingness, however. *If*, and he emphasizes the conditional, *if* the Athenians were to decide to let him go, if they voted not to convict and punish, on the condition that Socrates cease engaging in his philosophical conversations, he would not obey them. He would obey the god of Delphi, who, Socrates believes, has ordered him to interrogate and refute other human beings who claim to have knowledge of the most important things—namely, what is noble and good.

In claiming to serve the god as he had served the city of Athens in the military at the risk of his own life, Socrates might thus appear to exemplify the virtue of courage. At the very least, his defense reminds us, the possibility of human beings possessing and displaying this virtue depends upon our foreknowledge of our death. If we did not know that we can and will die, we would not be able to act “courageously” in the face of death. The significance of our foreknowledge of our death, in this case, would not be that it enables us to see or understand our life as chosen, therefore, but that it enables us to rise above our instinctive fear and thus to live virtuous or well.

In the *Apology* Socrates undermines himself as an epitome of courage, however, not merely by somewhat incongruously comparing himself, a seventy year old man who can expect to die of natural causes soon in any case, to the young hero Achilles. Socrates did serve in the Athenian army, but Socrates is not really anyone's image of a war hero. Socrates undermines his own claim to exemplify courage in the face of death—at least as courage is ordinarily understood—by declaring

that fearing death involves a claim to know what human beings do not know, i.e., that death is something bad. Socrates does not fear death, because he knows that he does not know whether death is something good or bad. It might be little different from a long sleep. But, if death is not to be feared, the person who risks losing his life by continuing to do what he is convinced is good and right no longer appears to be so courageous or heroic. Indeed, we might ask whether he is virtuous—or merely stubborn? We return to the question of what exactly is exemplary about Socrates.

In the defense speech Socrates gives to the Athenian jury he claims that he has been not only courageous but also just in dedicating his life to philosophy. Rather than accumulating wealth or taking care of his own family, Socrates has spent all his time and effort going around, like a gadfly, asking his fellow citizens why they fear death, and seek to enhance their reputations and wealth, rather than caring about the good of their souls by seeking truth and intelligence. As a result, he reminds the jury, he lives in 10,000-fold poverty. We later readers of Plato know, however, that Socrates did not persuade his fellow citizens that he was acting in the public interest and so justly as well as courageously and piously. They believed that the questions he posed to others had shown that he did not believe in the gods of the city, and that the example he had set for the young people who listened to him question their elders had corrupted the young as well.

Instead of pleading with the jury to pity him, an old man, and his family, who would be left destitute if he were convicted and killed, at the end of his defense Socrates resolutely declares that he will not act the way most of the countrymen do—by pleading for mercy. To ask the jury to vote on the basis of compassion rather than on the basis of what they think is just and right would be to corrupt them. He denies that he corrupts others, as charged. But the criticism of his countrymen implicit in the contrast Socrates draws at the end of his defense between their behavior when on trial and his—as well as his claims in the course of the speech to be the wisest and most pious, as well as the most just and courageous, man in Athens—have led some readers to conclude that Socrates provoked the jury into voting to convict by speaking so hubristically.

Whether hubristic or not, the contrast Socrates draws between his own behavior and that of his fellows should remind us of the fact we noticed earlier. Human beings would not be able to be virtuous or to display their virtue, if they did not know that there was a serious cost. In Plato's *Apology of Socrates* we thus see a version of the insight often attributed to the hero of the *Odyssey* after he visits Hades. Human life acquires its significance, its seriousness, or its meaning from our knowledge of our own mortality. If we were immortal, i.e., undying, like the gods of Olympus, we might suffer humiliation or even pain, for a time, but that negative feeling would persist only a moment—relatively speaking—in an eternal existence. Socrates may not have thought it was rational to fear death, but he leads those of us who learn about his life and death to take him—and what he did—seriously, precisely because he was willing to risk his life to maintain its goodness,



by insisting, not merely in effect but explicitly, that life is not worth living, if one cannot continue to philosophize.

If that were the “lesson,” so to speak, of Plato’s depiction of the trial and death of Socrates, Plato’s understanding of the significance of human knowledge of our own mortality would be, ironically, rather close to Heidegger’s. Confronted by the possibility of his own death, Socrates affirms the goodness of his own life in the face of future uncertainty. But that is not the lesson—or, perhaps I should say, not the only lesson—of the three dialogues—which being three look rather like a Greek tragedy—in which Plato presents the trial and death of Socrates.

Convinced that he had not done anything bad, Socrates refused, when given the opportunity, to propose anything he considered bad as an alternative to death. In particular, he refused to propose exile as an alternative to the death penalty, even though he suspected that the jury would have allowed him simply to leave Athens and thus to have continued living, and perhaps even philosophizing, elsewhere. “Noble indeed would life be for me,” Socrates declared, for “a human being of my age, to go into exile and to live exchanging one city for another, always being driven out! For I know well that wherever I go, the young will listen to me when I speak, just as they do here. And if I drive them away, they themselves will drive me out by persuading their elders. But if I do not drive them away, their fathers and families will drive me out” (37d-e).

In his refusal to propose exile, as in the third speech he gives after the Athenians vote to impose the death penalty, Socrates emphasizes the fact that he is seventy years old. The Athenians are not inflicting something on him that he will not suffer without their intervention very soon. They will acquire the opprobrium of having killed a wise man, he predicts. He, on the other hand, may experience something good.

Once again Socrates emphasizes the theme or conclusion with which I began: we all have to die, but no one knows what, if anything happens to human beings afterwards. Like Heidegger, Socrates emphasizes the fundamental uncertainty of human existence. The foundations—the causes and the effects and the end—of individual human lives are all unknown. The experience of death may amount merely to a cessation of consciousness; it may, in other words, be like a long, unending sleep. Perhaps, even better, we or our souls will continue to live on. If so, Socrates observes, he will be able to continue conversing the way he has while living with even more famous and potentially interesting interlocutors—like Homer and Hesiod, Palamedes or Ajax, Odysseus or Sisyphus. In any case, at the end of his defense Socrates reiterates what he reported in his first speech he had regularly told his fellow citizens. What is important is to stop fearing death. That is irrational. We all have to die in the end. What is important is to live well, and living well entails seeking the truth—about what is truly good and noble in human existence—and so acquiring intelligence. Like Heidegger, Socrates thus emphasizes, human existence involves an important choice. The choice is not merely whether to continue living

as we have consciously in the face of an uncertain future, however, or to expire. We have a choice, both as individuals and as peoples, of how to live. What we need most, therefore, is to discover what form of life is best.

O.K. we might respond to Socrates. Life is better if we don't fear death. Towards proverbially die a thousand times. But how exactly can or do human beings overcome what appears to be an instinctive reaction of aversion to, if not fear of, the unknown--if not of death per se? Socrates' answer to that question appears, in the first place, to be that we must recognize and accept death as a natural necessity. It is going to happen; it is inescapable. It is foolish to deny the plain fact. The question is how we live in the face of it, and the answer to that question is that we need to live so well that we can die looking back at our life with satisfaction. My life can't last forever, but is and was good so long as it lasted. The question, then, of course, is what makes it good?

The jury won't believe him, Socrates observes, when he tells them that the unexamined life is not worth living. Those of us who have had an opportunity—for centuries--to read and re-read the Platonic dialogues that depict Socrates' conversations with others can understand, however, why the search for ever more honor or wealth or life at any cost does not produce or result in lasting satisfaction. There is, indeed, nothing that mortals per se can achieve that is not itself mortal. Our families or progeny, our property, our cities, all of our "works" may last longer than we do as individuals, but they all perish in the end. Most of the things most human beings, like most of the Athenians, strive for, most of the time **are** essentially transitory and thus have to be repeated or reinstated, if they are to last. What, then, should we reaffirm and at least try to repeat? Socrates' answer to that question is that conversations of the kind in which he engaged, about virtue and the like, are a very great good for human beings. By repeating this claim Socrates says his audience won't believe Plato directs us, his readers, to investigate that claim. Why? What makes a life of philosophy good? It is not the product or result of the conversations, we note, that is affirmed. It is the goodness of the process, the communication and/or the activity itself that Socrates affirms and wants to see perpetuated. It is not the philosophical doctrine or argument per se that Socrates affirms as good; it is the life or vital activity of the philosopher in conversation with others.

In his *Apology* Socrates contrasts two approaches to the question of life and death. First and most common is the approach his fellow citizens take, fearing death and seeking to overcome that fear by amassing wealth and honor in search of worldly security or fame. Second and more rational, Socrates proposes, is to recognize that the fear of death is irrational. We don't know whether death is good or bad. We can, however, determine whether life is good. Of our own lives we have more knowledge. Understood merely to be the cessation of life, the goodness or badness of death depends on the goodness or badness of life. If, as Socrates claims, the unexamined life is not worth living, death should not be regarded as being something so terribly bad in most cases or most of the time. It signifies merely the



end of the ceaseless striving that characterizes most animals, including most human beings.

If life is good, however, death might then appear to be bad. Insofar as life is good, it makes sense to preserve and protect it. That is the reason human beings form, first, families, and, later, political associations. In the conversation Socrates has with his old friend Crito in jail after he is convicted, we thus see, Socrates stresses the obligations he and Crito have to obey the laws of Athens. The laws of the city made possible their birth and education; marriage laws are necessary to make families stable. As individual citizens of Athens Socrates and Crito also had an opportunity to consent or leave when they became mature adults. People ought to do what they have agreed to do. Socrates himself had stayed in Athens more evidently or observably than most of his fellow citizens, who took trips to other cities; he ventured abroad only as part of an Athenian army, i.e., as part of his civic duty. But, a critical reader could and should object, Socrates could have explained, although he does not, that he had stayed in Athens because Athenian laws, unlike the laws of most other cities, allowed him to philosophize. If he were not such an old man, it might, therefore, have made sense for Socrates to leave, after the jury declared, in effect, that Socratic philosophizing was a crime punishable by death. His decision to leave or not would and should have depended on whether he could find another city that would allow him to engage in philosophy. Socrates acknowledged that he had duties or responsibilities to his city and his fellow citizens, but we know from the *Apology* that he also insisted upon a limit to those duties: he would not obey a law that prohibited him from philosophizing. Again, a critical reader would ask, won't Socrates be unable to philosophize when he is dead? If he and his arguments were going to be consistent, shouldn't he have tried to escape?

Socrates agreed to stay, to stand trial, and to accept the death penalty for the same reason that he refused to propose exile. He was an old man who was going to die soon in any case; and there was no place nearby he could go and continue to philosophize without incurring opprobrium, if not persecution. Socrates thus used the opportunity created by his trial (and naturally impending death) to convince others—not only in Athens but also in other cities—that philosophers do not merely or always undermine the rule of law by encouraging their companions to raise questions about its justice or necessity. They also provide arguments showing why laws are necessary and should generally be obeyed. It was not his own particular existence he wanted to perpetuate, after all, but the activity called philosophy. He thus did what he could to persuade others to tolerate, if not themselves to engage actively in it.

Socrates recognized an obligation to obey the laws of his city insofar, but only insofar as they made a good and virtuous life possible. He did not try to escape from jail for the same reason he would not agree to remain silent if the Athenians agreed not to convict him. All forms of life, all forms of human existence are not worth living. He could not and would not have consent to the rule of Athenian law

if and when it prohibited him from philosophizing. Life, and hence the protection of life, is a necessary condition, but only a condition for living well. Socrates recognized that he needed the help and cooperation of others not merely to live, but to live well, that is, to philosophize. It is not possible to enjoy that very great good, to converse about virtue and the other matters Socrates talked about, all by one's self. A Socratic philosopher thus recognizes that he or she has debts to others, particularly to his or her fellow citizens, but a Socratic philosopher also recognizes that those debts should not be paid by sacrificing that for the sake of which the debts are incurred.

In the *Phaedo* Plato thus shows Socrates making yet another, a second defense of his decision to stand trial and accept the expected convicted and punishment. This defense is not directed to Socrates' fellow citizens. It is directed, instead, to his associates or companions, some of whom were not Athenian. The two young men to whom Socrates speaks most in the *Phaedo* were Theban. Having come from Thebes to Athens to converse with Socrates, they probably would have followed Socrates if he had fled to another city in order to continue conversing with him there. Having been told by Crito that Socrates did not have to stand trial in the first place and that he, Crito, had offered to help Socrates escape from prison after he was convicted, these young Thebans believe that Socrates is committing suicide by staying in jail and drinking the hemlock. They accuse him of illiberality, if not injustice for leaving them, his friends, bereft of his company and comfort, as well as of impiety, by taking his own life.

Socrates agrees not only to defend himself, but also to seek comfort for himself and his friends in the face of his own impending death by relating stories and arguments he has heard about what happens afterwards. Those who know the dialogue might object: didn't you begin by claiming that religious thinkers look to the afterlife, but that philosophers, like Socrates in the *Apology*, recognizing that we don't know what, if anything comes after death concentrate on the implications of our foreknowledge of our own mortality for this life? In the *Phaedo* most of the arguments and stories (literally *muthologia* or mythology) Socrates relates concern the afterlife; they are intended to "prove" the immortality of the soul.

I would like to respond to this objection at the outset by admitting that Socrates does present a variety of arguments and stories that are supposed to show that the soul is immortal. In fact, however, Plato also shows his readers that neither Socrates nor his interlocutors are convinced by these stories and arguments. There is very little unanimity among readers of Plato, but with regard to the "proofs" of the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo* virtually all commentators agree, they aren't any good.

If Socrates is not trying to convince himself and his associates that the soul is immortal on his last day on earth, what then is he doing in the *Phaedo*? I suggest the following. Socrates retells the stories and relates the arguments, beginning somewhat fancifully with the suggestion that philosophy itself consists in a search for

death, to show his associates (as well as Plato's readers) that people who engage in philosophical or scientific investigations do not and cannot take comfort in stories about the afterlife like those the Pythagoreans propagated. Because all parties to this conversation are sensitive about the feelings of others—Socrates to and for the grief his companions feel at his death, his companions for Socrates' presumed anxiety in the face of his impending death—neither he nor they announce their skepticism forthrightly. By relating and thus reminding his interlocutors of what others have said about the immortality or the soul—or the causes of life and what happens after death—Socrates makes his interlocutors (as well as Plato's readers) recognize that they cannot and really do not take comfort in such accounts. The problem or danger that thus emerges at the middle of the dialogue is not simply or merely that human beings fear death, because death is and will always remain something essentially unknown. The problem is that, in the face of the limits of reason that are imposed by our mortality, human beings will come to resent and thus to hate reason. Giving up even the attempt to live according to reason, they will give up all possibility of living the only form of human existence Socrates himself has found to be worthwhile.

In order to preserve his associates' belief not in the immortality of the soul, but in the possibility or potential of a human life based on reason, Socrates brings himself, his experiences or feelings and thoughts, forward as an example. He tells them how he tried and failed to discover the cause or causes of things not merely coming into being, but living. He then tells them how and why he was disappointed with the promise he saw in Anaxagoras' dictum that mind rules to explain why it is good that everything is as it is. He explains finally how and why, having been intellectually "blinded" by these attempts to discover or look at the cause of all becoming—or being—he then turned to investigating the arguments human beings make about them. Socrates admits, in other words, that human beings do not and will not ever know why we or other things come to be any more than we will ever know what precisely what or why things will happen in the future. He admits, in other words, the fundamental uncertainty that Heidegger emphasizes. But, Socrates suggests, human beings can live happily in the face of that uncertainty, not by resolutely denying that there is anything eternal or beyond human knowledge, or cherishing the world in which they happen to find themselves because all things are essentially transitory and will not last even a day if we do not care for them. Human beings can find direction and meaning in their lives if they adhere to his "safe" argument, the argument which famously claims that the sensible things we encounter in the world are as they are because and insofar as they share or participate in certain general characteristics or qualities—the ideas or forms. Socrates endorses this argument, because it enables him and others to continue asking, in particular, what makes human life good, noble, and just? It thus enables us to continue trying to find and to do what is good for our souls—whether these be understood in terms of mind or simply of life—and, even, to find provisional answers. It does not result in the possession of knowledge, because Socrates' safe argument does not even promise to generate

knowledge of the whole, and without knowledge of the whole, we cannot and do not have knowledge properly speaking. Indeed, Socrates' argument suggests that there is a persistent difference or gap between those things which never change and hence are purely intelligible, not sensible or bodily, and the sensible, bodily things we encounter in the world, including ourselves and other human beings. We cannot know why things come into being nor, despite the great efforts and improvements we have seen in natural science, can we trace all the complex interactions of subatomic particles that go on—perhaps infinitely. We must not forget, however, that the world as we first and most naively encounter it is not completely chaotic, constituted or constituting an unending flux or on-going series of interactions. It is, on the contrary, composed of different kinds of things. We can, do and should sort these things into kinds—basically and perhaps ultimately, according to whether they are good or bad for us. So we are led to ask, again, what is truly good? We ourselves appear to be a “kind,” though sensible, bodily, and thus not perfectly or completely intelligible, both like and unlike others. We are, to return to the theme of the lecture—and Plato's dialogue—mortal. We know that we are going to die, and we live well in the face of that knowledge, not merely or solely by admitting and confronting our limitations, but also and perhaps more importantly, by recognizing our potential. We may never possess complete knowledge, but we are aware and can gain greater knowledge of things that are greater, longer lasting, more intelligible, and more beautiful than we—whether we understand ourselves to be individuals, a people or a species.

As Socrates tells his associates, so Plato shows his readers in the *Phaedo*, it is impossible to die well or bravely, unless one has lived well. And to live well, Socrates urges his companions, it is necessary not only to recognize the limitations mortality puts on human life but also the powers or possibilities that inhere in our intelligence. Socrates does not care what happens to his corpse, he tells his old friend Crito, because he does not identify his existence with his body. He has a family to whom he bids farewell both at the beginning and the end of the last day of his life. He spends his final hours, however, conversing with his associates as he has in the past. Such conversations are a very great good for a human being, he told his fellow citizens at his trial. They are what has made his own life worth living and what he wants to see continue or continued by others after his death. Socrates left an inheritance, but his legacy was not biological or legal so much as intellectual or spiritual. He wanted and sought above all to perpetuate his philosophy by communicating the passion for it to others who were younger. Socrates did not die alone, Plato shows in the *Phaedo*. He died in the midst of the loving company of his friends, who were both Athenians and foreigners. Such conversations and friends made Socrates' life worth living, according to his own testimony, and, Socrates had reason to hope, what made his own life worth living, that is to say, his own vital activity, would be perpetuated by and in the lives of his associates. His own death did not mark the end.