Chapter 1
Did Plato Articulate the Achilles Argument?

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Moses Mendelssohn’s *Phaedon, oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele in Drey Gesprächen* (1767), a dialogue that owes its name, if not its content, to Plato’s eponymous work, presents a surprisingly resilient argument for the simplicity and immortality of the soul. The argument proceeds from the assumption that extended substance (matter) is infinitely divisible into progressively smaller parts. Halfway through the ‘Zwyetes Gespräch,’ Mendelssohn’s ‘Sokrates’ presents a thesis for refutation, a thesis that is not explicitly targeted for refutation in Plato’s dialogue, but which strongly resembles a thesis that Leibniz attacks in the *Monadology*.

The thesis is the following:

(M): ‘The ability to think may belong to an extended soul.’

Lorne Falkenstein has summarized the ensuing argument as a reductio ad absurdum of three purportedly exhaustive alternatives for explaining how an extended soul could be the subject of a unified – whole – thought. A thought is a complex representation, consisting of many parts, but in order to be one thought these separate parts must somehow be brought together in one mind. A mind aware of each word in the first line of Goethe’s ‘Wandrers Nachtlied,’ ‘Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh,’ is

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2 I will refer to Mendelssohn’s Socrates as ‘Sokrates,’ with a ‘k’. Although Plato’s Socrates was also Socrates with a ‘k’ (kappa), I will refrain from referring to him in Greek.

3 Lorne Falkenstein, ‘A Double Edged Sword?’, pp. 566–567 and his contribution to this volume.
not necessarily aware of the whole thought expressed therein. The mind may only be aware of each word successively, so that the hilltops are forgotten by the time the mind thinks of the calm, or the mind may be aware of each word simultaneously, but not be aware of them in relation to each other. Now, if as stipulated in (M) an extended soul were to have a thought, we may ask with Sokrates in which part of the extended soul the thought inheres. (i) If the part is itself made up of parts, we must determine in what part of the part of the soul the thought inheres, thus embarking on a quest for the ultimate part in an infinite series. If, on the other hand, the part is simple, we reject the assumption that the soul is extended and give up the argument (Mendelssohn’s Sokrates is a Cartesian about matter, it seems) \( \text{(Phaedon, pp. 96–98)} \). (ii) If, on the other hand, we say that each part of the extended soul thinks the whole thought, we’ll replicate the same function needlessly – we’ll have as many whole thoughts as there are parts of soul: an infinite number \( \text{(Phaedon, pp. 97–98)} \). But, (iii) If each part merely thinks part of the thought, we’ll violate the principle of the unity of consciousness, since there won’t be an awareness of the whole thought \( \text{(Phaedon, p. 96)} \). Rather, there will be one awareness of the calm, one of the hilltops and so on, which is not the same as an awareness of any one thought expressed by Goethe’s line. But it’s simply a fact that we do have a unified awareness of whole thoughts. Therefore, it cannot be the case that each part thinks a part of the whole thought. Sokrates, Mendelssohn’s mouthpiece, concludes his trilemmatic argument for the simplicity of the soul by pointing out that the thesis (M), ‘The ability to think may belong to an extended soul,’ is self-refuting. From (M), Sokrates and his friends Simmias and Cebes (reunited with Socrates for the encore performance) are able to derive ‘den schnurstrachs entgegengesetzten Satz’ (the exact opposite proposition) by a series of supposedly valid inferences.\(^6\)

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\(^4\) Goethe wrote the ‘Wandrers Nachtlied’ in September of 1780, so this is obviously my illustration, not Mendelssohn’s.

\(^5\) My reconstruction of the argument follows Lorne Falkenstein, ‘A Double Edged Sword?’, pp. 566–567. The ‘words-of-a-verse’ illustration is Kant’s own (although the underlying idea is found in ovo in Plotinus’ Enneads, IV, 7, line 18–19). As Kant writes in the first edition of the Critique, presenting the third lemma of the Achilles argument, ‘For representations (for instance, the single words of a verse), distributed among different beings, never make up a whole thought (a verse), and it is therefore impossible that a thought should inhere in what is essentially composite [einem Zusammengesetzten, als einem solchen]. It is therefore possible only in a single substance [in einer Substanz], which, not being an aggregate of many, is absolutely simple [schlechterdings einfach]’ (A 352). I quote Norman Kemp Smith’s translation of Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason (London: Macmillan Press, 1992). For the German I have consulted Immanuel Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag, 1974).

\(^6\) Surveying the road they have traveled, Sokrates observes: ‘Wir haben voraus gesetzt, das Denkungsvermögen sey eine Eigenschaft des Zusammengesetzten, und, wie wunderbar! aus dieser Voraussetzung selbst bringen wir, durch eine Reihe von Vernunftschlüssen, den schnurstrachs entgegengesetzten Satz heraus, daβ nehmlich das Empfinden und Denken nothwendig Eigenschaften des Einfachen und nich Zusammengesetzten seyn müßen: ist dieses nicht ein hinlänglicher Beweis, daβ jene Voraussetzung unmöglich, sich selbst widersprechend, und also zu verwerten sey? – Niemand kann dieses in Zweifel ziehen’ \( \text{(Phaedon, p. 98)} \).