

Due Tuesday, October 31

One way to look at Plato's *Phaedo* is as an account of Socrates shouldering the task of *making reasonable* a belief in the soul that is very important for himself and for those around him – very important for their understanding of their lives. While he and the others talk about *proofs*, it is probably more accurate to say that what they are giving is *accounts* that make their beliefs seem reasonable and sensible. The "reasonableness" that they have in mind does not seem to be like the abstract logical and mathematical model that Anita and Elizabeth critique in *Who's to Say?* but what we might call a humanistic or even *philosophical* reasonableness. I think this is in part what Socrates means when he says it is a *noble risk* to believe the story he tells about the soul. Additionally, it seems from what was said in the middle section that this "noble risk" also refers to the process of engaging in "reasonable discourse" about anything: by giving reasons for our beliefs, we risk the chance that contrary reasons may emerge or that we won't be as good at defending our beliefs as we'd like to be.

There are many questions like this: topics about which it is important to have well thought-out and defensible reasons for belief, or stories that clarify and highlight the crux of what we believe, even if the reasons and thoughts we adduce for our belief don't amount to an infallible *proof* of our belief. That is, there are a great deal of important questions in life about which we ultimately have to take the "noble risk" of believing some reasonable account or defense of a particular point of view. What we believe in such cases is *not irrational* – it's something we have discussed with others and both heard and *given reasons* about – but nevertheless a "noble risk" remains in our believing what is the best answer.

Choose an important question that you have encountered in your life – **DO NOT** choose the question of the immortality of the soul – and write an essay describing how you have come to think as you do about it. In your essay, explain why the question is important, and *what reasons can be given* for thinking one way or the other about it (it might be helpful to recall discussions with friends about it). Include a reasonable account that would argue against what you ultimately believe (as Plato's dialogue contains several initially persuasive arguments for why the soul might be thought *not* to be immortal), and explain why you think you nevertheless have *good reasons* for taking the "noble risk" of believing as you do. If you do this well, your ultimate belief should *not* come across an *arbitrary* belief, that is, one that involves a pure leap of faith, but one that has good although perhaps not air-tight reasons supporting it.

In choosing your question, it's best to think of something that has been a real question for *you*. It could be a question about something that's hard to understand, or a question about how to live and act, or even a question about social ethics and morality. But make sure it is a significant and not a trivial question. Also, it is best not to choose a topic about which you remain undecided – it's hard to see where a "noble risk" is operating if you don't risk deciding one way or the other.

Maximum length: 1200 words

Remember: Come up with an original title for your essay. "A Noble Risk" is not an original title, although the phrase can be used as part of your title.