

# The Last Days of Socrates

*Plato*

March 20 - March 28, 2005

This is a collection of four pieces on Socrates. The first a dialogue with Euthyphro, in which Socrates takes him to task for having brought his own father to trial for manslaughter, the second is Socrates apology, or rather defense against the charges of corruption that has been levied against him. The third is a short dialogue with Crito who pleads with him to escape, something that probably would have suited the authorities beautifully, and the final is a dialogue, or rather a dialogue within a dialogue on Socrates last hours and his emptying of the poisoned chalet and his subsequent death as a model of dignity. Of the four, the last is the most interesting, the most moving, and the most significant, and hence the one worthiest of study and comment. So let us after a preamble, dispose of the first three.

The historical presence of Socrates does not seem to be in doubt<sup>1</sup> although nothing of his own hand has been handed down to us, thus the Socrates we encounter may for all intents and purposes be considered a fictional character out of the works of Plato. The parallels with Jesus are striking. Both are wandering around in poverty teaching enlightenment and disassociation with the present material world, attracting an exclusive following of disciples. The life of Jesus, legendary or not, is well-known to everyone benefitting from a Christian instruction. The life of Socrates, although one with which most school-children are acquainted, has nevertheless not been presented in such children-friendly packages as that of Jesus, and remains to most of us rather vague. It thus remains a potential for pediatric edification as of yet not tapped.

The introductory dialogue with Euthyphro is circular. Socrates trying to draw him out unsuccessfully. One of the noteworthy points made by Socrates is that in certain areas of dispute, enmity is not an outcome. If say we argue which number is the largest, we do not get at each others throats, but simply do some arithmetic<sup>2</sup>, thus implying that in true disputes other things than those which are explicitly being said are actually at stake. The apology presents Socrates as a lawyer rather than a philosopher, be it a rather philosophical one. This is of course not surprising considering the circumstances Socrates finds himself in. The point to note is though that Socrates arguments as a lawyer does not significantly differ from his arguments as a philosopher. Classical Greek thought is Modern thought

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<sup>1</sup> The contrast, as well as the parallels with Jesus, are noteworthy. In addition to the reports of Plato there are other accounts of him, most infamously as a sophist character in the play 'the Clouds' by Aristophanes. Also there are busts, whether contemporary or not I guess is impossible to tell, attributed to be his likeness. The historical fact of Jesus is far more controversial. What to be noted is not as much the obscurity of Jesus as the fact that a character is still remembered two and a half millenia after his death, and one wonders how many of our contemporaries will be similarly celebrated in the year 5000.

<sup>2</sup> A foretaste of Leibniz dream that in the future all disputes would be settled by calculations

in its incipency, manifested by its lack of individuation and specialization<sup>3</sup>. Natural Science being part of philosophical speculation, and rhetorics and mathematical deduction being the two sides of the same coin of reasoning. In his apology Socrates professes a total stoicism in the face of death, either it is the bliss of a dreamless sleep or a welcome reunion with departed souls. What annoys Socrates is not the prospects of his own individual death (which would be imminent anyway given his age) but the miscarriage of justice. Also in the apology we find the oft quoted views as to the effect that an unexamined life is not worth living. Finally the third dialogue deals with the entreaties of Crito. To escape would be to play into the hands of the authorities and to lead to a life of dishonor. Because Socrates claims that the basis for society is the law, and we are committed to obey it not only when it pleases us and is to our best interests but also when we bitterly oppose its judgements. Here is clearly a division between earthly justice and divine hinted at. As political individuals part of a society we are bound to its laws, even when unjust, this is the price we pay for its orderly conduct. But the life of the body imprisoned in time is a lower kind of life, the real life is of the mind and eternal. The parallels with the teaching of Jesus is once again manifest.

The dialogue of Phaedo takes up as much volume as the three prior together. As noted above it is really a dialogue within a dialogue, in which Echecrates asks Phaedo about the last day of Socrates, and in which the latter gives a very vivid account as to make us forget that those are his mere words, but transporting us to the very scene. Thus at the end of the piece, it comes almost as a jolting surprise, to be brought back to the conversation of Echecrates with Phaedo, just as we after a vivid dream encounter mundane reality.

Socrates has, in the view of Plato, been falsely identified as a sophist. Admittedly Socrates differs from the sophists in some essential ways, (not only because he did not accept money for his teaching), to which we will return below; but his associations with the sophists is not entirely unfounded. The main thrust of the last hours of Socrates is his proof by rational argument of the immortality of the soul. This is indeed a tall order for logical deduction especially given such a paucity of empirical foundation, and for Socrates to carry it through, he needs to stretch his principles of reasoning well beyond the breaking point. His reasoning is nevertheless smooth and seductive, based upon such sophistic devices as analogy and the frivolous principle of turning implications the other way around. Nevertheless his conduct of reasoning is deceptively deductive proceeding step by step, each step being seemingly ironclad as a tautology. His argument is also an argument for Platos own ideas of archetypical Forms residing in a kind of detached heaven to which the soul strives to reach. While Christianity talks about salvation, Platonism reaches for transcendental knowledge and understanding, a religious quest particularly appealing to a philosophically minded mathematician. First Socrates proves that the soul antedates the body as learning is really a kind of recollection. We do possess knowledge of such things that it is impossible that we would have had the opportunity to learn. The notion of an absolute equality, is one such abstract concept to which we seem to have a priori knowledge, to which we try to approximate the imperfect ones we encounter in the

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<sup>3</sup> One is reminded of Russells view of philosophy advancing by amputation, as soon as a branch of philosophy acquires sufficient foundations, it ceases to be part of philosophy and emerges as a branch of science

life of the senses. In the same way there are ideals of Beauty and Goodness which we recognise and apply as standards. One may argue that Plato here anticipates instinctive knowledge or intrinsic paradigms of thoughts proposed by Kant. Socrates is made to over and over again stress the deficiency of the body and the senses with which it views the world, an idealistic tradition in Greek thought forcefully expounded by Parmenides, who argued that the world appears to the deceptive senses as multifarious and varied, but true knowledge sees the world as one and undivided. It may be argued that Socrates is not reasoning in order to convince himself but to comfort those around him. Those nevertheless are not entirely taken in. Simmias and above all Cebes, as a precedent of the doubting Thomas, have their misgivings. What, Cebes counters, even if we grant the prior existence of the soul and its ability, like a tailor of surviving the garments processed out of his hands, the latter is nevertheless survived by his last coat, and in the same way, the soul may be exhausted by a long succession of incarnations and thus liable to expire before that of its final embodiment. This is another version of the fear of extinction most of us experience as youths, not as an imminent calamity but as an eventual inevitable one, testifying to the presumed invariance of our ego allowing a total identification with the moment, however far projected into the future. This is indeed a valiant objection everyone concedes, including Socrates, and the dialogue at this moment is allowed to briefly return to the encounter of Euthydemus and Phaedrus enhancing the dramatic tension. We are assured by Phaedrus that Socrates manages this beautifully, surpassing the expectations even of his admiring disciples, and the report is resumed. And indeed Socrates rises to the occasion and convinces everyone of the immortality of the soul, although a modern reader may be excused not to be similarly persuaded. Socrates works, as mentioned above, in similes and analogies. Out of sleep we awaken to its opposite, just as awokenness is turned into sleep. And if the body symbolizes death, then the soul necessarily stands for life. And just as death follows life, in the same way as night day, life its opposite must come out of death. To us the tenor of the arguments are reminiscent of the classical proof of the existence of God, postulating the latter to be the perfect being, and existence a necessary attribute of a perfect being.

In the end Socrates presents a long harangue about the true nature of the earth, likening us to fishes dwelling in the depths of oceans, mistaking the surface of the water for that of the sky. This fantastic tale of great profusions of details must be thought of as a purely imaginative outlet of Plato, whether subconsciously unintentional or deliberate, but it presents many features reminiscent of Christian and Hindu mythology. Successive transmigrations of the soul, eternal damnations of degenerate souls thrust into a bottomless river, as well as a purgatory, in which the potentially excusable may prove their worth and get another chance. More interesting though is the conception of the Earth as spherical, and the realization that it needs no pillar of support (what will support the pillar?) as all directions are equivalent, and thus there is no preferred direction of falling, an argument that almost word by word prefigures the argument of Newton two-thousand years later.

Socrates distances himself from the sophists, the Post-modernists of Antiquity, by pointing out that they are misologists. Misology and misanthropy arise in the same way he explains. The latter from an uncritical trust in human nature, which in the end though inevitable disappointments, leads to a universal mistrust of people. In the same way the

misologist has come to despair not only of the rational means of getting at truth but also of truth itself. He thus will argue not in order to find truth but only to obtain its appearance and to get the approval of his audience. Not surprisingly such people find themselves arguing both sides of a question with equal fervor, thereby considering themselves very clever. As noted above, the parallels with modern Post-modernists are striking. Thus Socrates is not a sophist because unlike them he has a faith in and a commitment to truth. In fact he lays claim to a wisdom transcending cleverness, something he disingeniously argues in his apology, by pointing out that he is the least ignorant of all humans, as he at least acknowledges that he knows nothing. Disingenuous indeed as he through his very arguing repeatedly gives it the lie. But maybe it is all a play after all, the sophist may argue, an incontinent indulgence in irony, proving that in the end he may be the sophist of the sophists, well aware that no fate but total extinction would await him, as he emptied the chalet, swallowed the brew of hemlock, and walked around until the legs became too heavy, lying down to calmly await the conquering cold to reach and claim his heart. Still even so, it does not detract from the dignity of his last hours.

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