

Socrates Unchained Part II: Some Interpretive Thematics On The Socratic Problem

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In an earlier study entitled **Socrates Unchained** (*Unitas*, 1989: 17-32), we perused I.F. Stone's bestseller *The Trial of Socrates* (1990). The book was both enchanting and captivating, written in style of an accomplished journalist who figured quite successfully in his dream of becoming a 'philosopher'. The combination of literary construction and philosophical ambition engendered by Stone was ingenious. The *Dialogues* itself makes use of this unique literary genre which could either be a blessing or curse to the interpreter depending on his intellectual dispositions. I.F. Stone showed an interesting grasp of the primary sources of his chosen subject matter. His sources were primarily the Socratic or the Early Dialogues, and in particular, the *Apology*.

There are, however, other sources which similarly propose to interpret the same texts. This is termed the *quadriga* so that aside from Plato, we have the interpretations of Aristotle, Xenophon, and Aristophanes which could be availed in the encounter with the problematic of interpreting the Early Dialogues. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss these other sources except by way of an incidental manner. It is Plato's Socrates of the Early Dialogues we are

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referring to when we make reference to such name. In this paper, I hope to offer some thematical observations which I think enter into the possible construction of an interpretive model in the reading of the text.

This paper is introductory and exploratory in nature. Issues will not be treated in detail.

I. The Socratic Problem. Is he the One?

THERE IS THE POSSIBILITY OF CHARACTERIZING THE MORAL PORTRAIT OF SOCRATES AS HE FIGURES IN THE EARLY DIALOGUES E.G., IN THE APOLOGY, AS DISTINCT FROM THE SOCRATES OF THE MIDDLE AND THE LATER DIALOGUES. THIS IS ACHIEVED IN TERMS OF AN ANALYSIS OF FORM, METHOD, TONE, AND SUBJECT MATTER.

1.1. The Early Socratic Dialogues compared to the two other divisions (Middle and Later) is a peculiar set of the whole collection where the dramatic context and consciousness impinge with more coherence and determination of a distinct persona in what appears as a historical projection of the writer. Here is a situation where a basic allegiance to the central character is palpably portrayed, oftentimes bordering on a portrayal which is expressive of dramatic artistry. It is highly probable that an unconscious philosophic autobiography of the writer, vis-a-vis his personal ideals, weaves into the text expressed with an artistry and literary genre packaging the events e.g., *The Trial* as the writer perceived the court scenarios. It goes without saying that this text cannot be taken as a biography of the central character in our present tense of acceptance.

1.2 *The Apology* is a unique biography which does not preclude the urgency of addressing the major ideology of the main character together with his distinct modes of thinking which steers the direction and goals of the interpretive task. This particular point is crucial in the interpretive access to the basic moral intuition of the writer, more than the portrayed central figure, which motivates and underpins the text.

1.3 The fundamental thematic which the writer of the *Apology* works out, forges the bonding point between the writer and the central character. This is the campaign against the sophistic brand of

tentativities and relativistic mind frame resulting in a pragmatic yet tenuous attitude towards the 'whatness' of being human and humanity, towards the 'howness' of being political and politics, obtaining in the polis of Athens which was at grips with a convolution of reforms of identities..

1.4 The interpreter however disables himself when he conjures the problematic simply as ethical, or political, or metaphysical at its roots. The writer of the Early Dialogues did not have these compartments in mind. The intrinsic assumption of the problematic appears to be a question of rationality, of the thinking problematic in the context of being human as a social animal.

1.5 The Early Socratic Dialogues are characterized by their markedly aporetic disposition. This is a concealment of an intended positive turn with a 'negative' or 'openended' front expressed in a dialectics of question-and-answer event taking place in an artistically contrived scenario. The question-and-answer drama provides the necessary space to permutate tentatives. Tentatives are human expressions which contemporizes for time to whet an inner thirst for the Truth and for truthfulness. Dialectics is an interactive play of hypotheses to slowly unveil reality at a period which is always in destination.

1.6. The contrivance is neither pure fiction nor actual fact. It is an artistic faction of both, of life imitating art, and of art imitating reality. Reality is stretched to its imitative form to experiment with the trivia of art without the power of the majority politic. The scenario is spelled out in dialogue form which at once involves an indissolubly bonded combination of art and philosophy. (Michael Frede, 1992:201). We marvel at the grandeur of human communion in dialogue, in praxis, in an art which is the ultimate of becoming human. Humanity as truth refuses to apologize for its personal beingness.

1.7 The absence of explicitude does not mean that the aporetic character is to be viewed simply as open ended. This would not make our Socrates no different from the veiled sophistications and empty sagacity of the Sophists (Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1991:328 et passim). It is an open endedness which intimates a positive goal, of a purpose, and of an immanent constructiveness which can only project from a distantiating, in its circular turn from the state of affairs to a state of the art. Any confession of ignorance can only be worthily achieved by

a radical grounding in being human, apart from uncritical acceptance of tradition which hampered the growth and nurture of the *polis*.

1.8. The Socratic Dialogues appear to be more extroverted and venturesome in tone compared to the inspirational but brooding vein of the other dialogues (Terry Penner, 1992:125). It is contagious in its spontaneity and pervasive in its optimism.

1.9. The Socratic Dialogues are almost exclusively anthropological and personal, e.g., the "tendence or care of the soul." The Socrates of the other dialogues is concocted into multivalent personalities, so that aside from the urgent issue of being human, his interests farm out to more versatile concerns such as metaphysics, language, religion, education, science, and art (G. Vlastos, 1991:48).

2. Virtue in the Socratic Dialogue is an intellectual ability of giving an account of, and not simply being able to practice or possess the expertise of knowing 'how' to do things. The Middle and Later Dialogues consider training of emotions and attitudes as precondition to intellectual expertises.

2.1. The Aristotelian Socrates on the other hand considers all virtues as instances of *phronesis* (EN 1144b19-30) and of knowledge.

2.2. Arithmetic and geometry for example are considered ordinary and pedestrian expertises similar to cobblery. These are not viewed to produce special knowledge or special epistemology as they are viewed in the Republic V-VII. At this later stage, arithmetic and geometry are geared to identify with objects such as good, justice and beauty *per se*.

2.3. The Socratic Dialogues interpret the dictum "No one errs willingly" in its literal equivalence, e.g., if anyone errs, it is due to ignorance. In the Later Dialogues, error could either be due to the state of the body or on account of bad upbringing.

2.4. The Socratic Definition is not the definition of the first instance, e.g., the term, meaning of a word, or a concept. The Socratic Definition delves on qualities and features (C.C.W.Taylor, 1992:137 et. passim).

2.5. The Early Socratic Dialogues appear to be the most appropriate source in any attempt to conjure and approximate the personality and ideas of this man as viewed by another man.

2.8. *Aporia* is the search for and the renewal of one's centers which recognition is aided with the help of and in company with others. It is the awareness of the need to edit one's choices continuously and this task is endless. One has achieved if one has recognized the fact that one is never what one thinks himself to be. One hardly knows anything at all if does not know the limitations of one's being.

2.9. The Aporetic Man is a man of Irony as he is a man of passion. He knows what he does not know, and this impels him to be more resolute, purposive, and realistic. Mortality makes him compassionate, insecurities transform him into a restless seeker for the experience of existence (Guardini, *Ibid.*: 7).

Corollary II

Aporia and Irony lead one to an existence of the urgent task of detour in the threatening being of political engagement. The aporetic man is not a caretaker of the teoria, unimaginable.

III. The Nature of the Socratic Dialogue. Why the Dialogues?

THE DIALOGUES ARE NOT TO BE TAKEN AS STRICTLY PHILOSOPHICAL TREATISES THOUGH THEY TOO DISPOSE THIS KIND OF THINKING. NEITHER ARE THEY TO BE VIEWED SIMPLY AS LITERARY DRAMATIC COMPOSITIONS. THE SOCRATIC DIALOGUES ARE AN AMALGAM.

3.0. The admission of ignorance does not necessarily imply that Socrates does not subscribe to any ethical conviction. The objective of allowing people to see things for themselves, even this takes a long process and waiting period, encases some leads which Socrates is trying to get us to see and to be. Inevitably, the division of the Dialogues into three stylometric parts is a scholarly creation, now an emerging convention, engendered to aid interpretation. The heart of the reading process is unitary so that the three divisions point at an interrogative spirit which is connective in nature. This connective nature directs towards a teleology.

3.1. The dialogue appears to address the Thinking Problematic, a self-criticism of *Unbeirrbarkeit und unverwirrbarkeit* (Gadamer, *ibid*). It is a philosophical orientation (or, in the context of the text, a reorientation), which affirms the rational nature of man. The seeming dangling or riddling process of *aporia* highlights the serious responsibility which the Dialogues view and consider truth. What seems to be held in utmost premium are the subjects who are involved as "uncontentious players" in Dialogue; homely and friendly (Gadamer, *ibid*:xi). The opinions which are intimate to them serve as vehicles of conversation (Jurgen Mittelstrasse, 1988:126).

3.2. The dialogue, on account of the series of "removes", from what would otherwise be a first hand account of a philosophical treatise, appears to provide initiations toward the act of philosophizing which engenders lighthouses and less of milestones, or as Plato in his opus is *in actu* Platonizing (N. Castillo, 1993:71 et passim). Our incorrigible dilemma is "What do we exactly mean when we say 'Plato says'?"

3.3. To know is not just a matter of having an argument, however good it may be. Knowledge involves and comprehends the rest of one's beliefs, interests, status and of one's whole life being in line with one's argument. It is a highly personal kind of achievement (Frede, 6). Philosophy as a way of life appeals to a knowledge which is an either/or; either you know yourself or you do not know anything at all. There seems to be a suggestive meaning that this truth may be clearer at a distance, e.g., the inputs of others in dialogue are essential. Knowing oneself is the key to the knowledge of knowing everything else.

3.4. This augurs the cardinal importance of analyzing the infrastructure of the Tradition of the text which one is venturing into and take into consideration its basic allegiances and fundamental moral intuitions (Charles Griswold, 1988:143). These components are not easily unearthed or automatically farmed out by respondents. There is reason and purpose therefore that the mode of dialectics may appear illogical and is not characterized by the rigor of argumentation found in a philosophical treatise. The essence of a dialogues is not so much as to win a debate as it is to process truth.

3.5. It is therefore with purpose that we find fallacious and outrageous arguments not apparent or probably deliberate in a philosophical treatise

3.6. The traditional Greek *eironeia* conjures an intent to deceive. The dialectics practiced by Socrates however is a considered superior form of *sophistike* compared to the run-of-the-mill *eirones* which the writer of the Dialogues call impostors (GV, 23 et passim). The Socratic Irony is a self-prevarication and the avoidance of pompousness draws kind words from and contrasted to the braggart by Aristotle (EN, 1127b23-6). What Socrates instilled to commonplace deception seems to be a new life of a complex irony which absorbs the finer possibilities of a yes or no; without pretense or deception for both are not the same as concealment or reservation. It is a process of decentering from the traditional vortices of man.

3.7. The composer of the Dialogues is deemed to have shared serious reservation for the written text. Hence the dialogic form of the text was both historically relevant to its local temporality yet still philosophically ordained. We note the Bollingen Series 1989, edited by Hamilton and Cairnes is all of 1743 pages made of 26 books, an appendix of three divisions, and an index. New translations and revisions are continuously published up to this moment. We are not aware of any scholar of the whole set of the Dialogues yet.

Corollary III

The Socratic Dialogues as a written text will have to be read as Dialogues, e.g., as spoken language, as a developing discussion (Gadamer, 1980:IX). It is a communion which comprehends the verbal and non-verbal communication, the latter of which appears more fundamental. The demand for circumspection posits a distantiation from a posturing of knowledge, authority and expertise.

IV. Dialogueing as a Continuing Enterprise. Why the Decentering Process?

DIALOGUEING IS ACCESSED BY SPEAKING AND THOUGHTFULNESS (PHRONESIS). THESE ARE GROUNDED BY TEXTING WHICH CAN ONLY MOVE FORWARD IN CORRESPONDING INTENSITY AS IT MOVES BACKWARD. APPROPRIATION IS APPROXIMATION AS IT IS A MEDIATION.

3.8. The Socratic Dialogue is a design that is not only protreptic (back-reading) and propaedeutic (teaching) reading but more importantly, it is essentially prognostic. The text's historical consciousness emits the tension that is inevitable from a compound of the ideals of philosophical enquiry and the nature of the language through which the enquiry must be engaged and articulated in the minds of others. The propaedeutic talent of dialogueing fertilizes basic dispositions to identify infirmities and retrieve awareness and meanings.

3.9. The existential character of the Socratic conversation invites, in fact requires the reader to participate actively no doubt sincerely and patiently. The investment of time is an important factor in order to enter into the *sanctum* of the interpretive circle. The mediation of a collective effort leads to the self-critical view that for Philosophy to be real it has to be a way of life. Beyond the horizontality of conversation is the Verticality of creative development of Philosophy of personal convictions and principles. It is not only pedagogic, it is arrestingly psychagogic leading to desire (erotic) Philosophy. As art imitating life, it is circular. As life imitating art, it is spiral.

4.0. Reading involves texting, as Socratic texting involves befriending and "home-ing" familiarity with the text. It is reading which is re-living and remembering. To read in this manner is to dialogue. To dialogue means more than one's capacity to speak and to articulate as it is to hear and to listen and to create insights. Talk must give way to the Reflexive Nonaction which arrests as one ruminates to consider, to discern and to reposition. These insights are fleeting and never definitive. They must be communed by deeds lest they be disabled by the fragility of word whether written or oral. Regardless however, there lies the imperative that we persevere in seeking the Whole.

4.1. The epistemic credentials of the nature of the Socratic discourse demand a peculiar indirectness and detour which is cooperative than combative, persuasive than aggressive, humanistic than simply being cognitive, and creative than simply being linear and algorithmic. An epistemic substitution creates a crosscheck between the ethics that ergonizes and the metaphysics which grounds logos. The aporetic acceptance of finitude breaks open to infinity which seeks the interiority of self-commentary, of self-resourcing, towards concretizing *Lebensform*. This is the endless work of phronesis or thoughtfulness of a higher level of ad hominem conversation.

4.2. The role of contrasts or even seeming contradictions is meant to inspire and stimulate conversation. It symbolizes the intrinsic agonality experienced by man when the search involves his why he is man. Understanding is taken to be an active character of the mind and argumentation as its characteristic mode of activity. It is a dialogue within the soul as its dialectical best, as it aims towards teleological consistency and comprehensiveness apart from argumentative reductionism. It is man's rediscovery of himself which is equated with the question of the importance of philosophy. The defense of Philosophy is the primary objective of the Dialogues (Griswold, 154). It is the enquiry into the Philosophy of philosophy which is rationality.

4.3. Dialogueing is priming for beginnings and of origins, e.g., the beginnings of the reasoning and critical-thinking man. The aporetic infrastructure assumes courage as vital ingredient. It takes no ordinary courage to experience and much less accept one's ignorance go through the process of being slowly uncovered and revealed.

4.4. Opinions are necessary ingredients in the enquiry. But these are not the opinions which are structured and systematized. They are not the axiomatic, theoretical or the linguistic construction type. The opinions which the Dialogues bother about are the prephilosophical crust which are originary and antedates the former. The latter contains the "Whole" mirroring the reflections of the Great Issues, the Unconscious Autobiography, the Unwritten Philosophy, the Basic Moral Intuitions and the Grounding Allegiances (Griswold, *ibid*). Within these parameters lie the focal Question.

4.5. The fundamentality of Question as dialogueing is similar to the conjuration of Philosophy of the Dialogues. Like life, it is larger than the answers given no matter how cogent they appear to be. Like life, Questions bear assumptions and tradition on one hand, and seek life beyond its own. The author of the Dialogues is utterly conscious of the colossal finitude and limitation of a rational critique hence the absence of systematization.

4.6. The Socratic Dialogues (the *Apology*) creates a panoramic preview of Philosophy, of its Kingship and prophecy in the life of man. The text is an open synthesis of the expanding universe of reason.

V. Interpreting Interpretives

4.7. Companionship in the dialogic circle is nourished by 'knowledgeable ignorance' (Gadamer 1988 :258). Outwardly negative, it is deep down passionately kind and sensitive.

4.8 Orality ensures spontaneity of the whole man, the corresponding respect owed to and appropriate for the parts of his being which makes him the kind of totality that he should be. The Whole which he admits of various levels of existence which is purified to the heights of and the focus on the apeiron in a dialogic circle.

4.9 The Whole is a paradigm of being able to stand up to the defense of one's convictions that is evolving, that listens while it conjures. It is an excessive oversimplification to interpret that the writer of the Early Dialogues considered the forms as the sole rights of the gods. The Platonic dialectics is the mediatory tool available to all to work out as much his appropriations.

5.0. Arguments in dialogues have their reasons for being. But arguments are only useful as they are non-manipulative and free of choreographed trickeries as the sophists were experts in doing. It is only in a purged state of the art of argumentation that philosophy can mean some being for man. Plato's defense of philosophy as the central case of the Trial of Socrates was a defense of the Thinking Man.

Suggested Readings

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