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THE RIDDLE OF SOCRATES' MOTIVATION IN THE *APOLOGY*

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In the *Apology* Plato clearly gives us a false explanation of why he went about talking with people on the streets of Athens. He surely wanted his reader to recognize it as being false. And he surely wanted the reader to go further and to try to determine Socrates' true motivation. We shall see that he offers various clues, and we shall follow these clues to the true explanation.

The clues arise from being critically engaged with the text. I think that Socrates is not merely talking to the jury but also to the reader of the dialogue when he says that the virtue of a judge is to ask, "Is that right?" (18a3-5). We are not to be like Socrates' uncritical interlocutors and say "Yes, Socrates" to whatever Socrates puts forth. When we become critically engaged with the text by asking whether or not something is right, we are led to see Plato's underlying meaning. For example, Socrates says both (1) that his accusers were so convincing that he almost forgot who he was (17a1-3), and (2) that of the many lies they told he was most amazed by one particular lie (17a4-b1). It is impossible to be amazed at the lies contained in a speech and at the same time be carried away by the speech's persuasiveness. Socrates is presenting himself as being at the extreme of credulity, for nothing could be more credulous than for an innocent person to accept an argument proving that his own guilty. When Socrates says that the jury should ask whether or not what is said is right, he is saying that they should not be this way. If you want to exercise good judgment about what Plato or anyone else says, you had better exercise the virtue of a judge and think critically. And then we shall see that this way of approaching Plato is the way to unlock the hidden meaning of the dialogue, just as the way Socrates in which unlocks the hidden meaning of the Oracle's pronouncement is by trying to prove it false.

I show that, when we articulate what is wrong with Socrates' contradictions, invalid arguments and false claims, we can see that Plato is saying: (1) that

Socrates went about showing people that they are ignorant because he cared about them like a father or an elder brother; (2) that he wanted to help them become angry with themselves for living vain, meaningless lives; and (3) that he wanted thereby to motivate them to strive to make their lives as good as possible.

By tying these results to specific riddles in the text Plato avoids the problem of the written word that is described at *Phaedrus* 275-276. There he and Phaedrus distinguish between the living word written in the soul and the written word that is an image of the living word (*Phaedrus* 276a5-9). This difference is exemplified by Meno's slave's superficial understanding of the fact that the way to double a square is to square the diagonal: "At this moment those opinions have just been stirred up in him as in a dream; but if he were repeatedly asked these same questions in a variety of ways, you know he will in the end have as exact an understanding of them as anyone" (*Meno* 85c9-d1). To receive the living word into his soul, the slave needs to do more than just repeat what he has been told. He needs to approach the problem in more than one way. Hence the problem of the written word: "They will read many things without instruction, and will therefore seem to know much, when for the most part they know nothing" (*Phaedrus* 275a7-b1). The written word generally does not give one more than one way of approaching a problem. When people who do not understand it pretend that they do "the written word always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself" (275e3-5). But by writing in riddles Plato causes us to come to terms with the underlying issues, thereby leading us into a new understanding. If successful, he is like the writer of the playful word, who "will be pleased when he writes for others following the same path and sees them putting forth tender shoots" (276d4-5). Plato mixes his metaphor here, but the continuity is between the branching path and the new shoots that branch off into new directions; we are to follow a path in which each piece of new growth leads one-at-a-time to a further branch along the path. It is not as if one read Aristotle and had an entire system of ideas put into one's head all at once. Plato's method also allows us to deal with those who do not know what they are talking about; they can be called to account by showing how what they say is not in accord with the formulation of one or another riddle, as I amply demonstrate in the notes.

There is an elegance to the *Apology*. Its contradictions, false claims, and invalid arguments are enjoyable to discover. Plato seems to be exemplifying what Socrates playfully describes Meletus as doing: "He seems, as it were, by composing a puzzle to be making a test: 'Will Socrates, the wise man, recognize that I am joking and contradicting myself, or shall I deceive him and the others who hear me?'" (*Apology* 27a1-4). And we shall see that there is also an elegance to the way

these problems lead to the answer of the riddle of why Socrates went about talking to people.

Almost all of the mistakes that I will be discussing have been noticed, at least to some extent, by other commentators. (The one that has not is not difficult to see: if Socrates knew how to teach human and political virtue, he would *not* be so vain as to refuse to teach it for a small amount of money.) But no one has ever suggested why Plato might be making these mistakes. I will derive meaning from individual mistakes and then relate these individual points together systematically.

1. Socrates Claims He Would Be Vain if He Could Teach Human and Political Virtue 20b7-c3

It is not unusual for people reading the *Apology* for the first time to think that Socrates is full of vanity. They think that he goes about showing people that they are not wise because he enjoys feeling superior to them. But *Apology* 20b7-c3 indicates that Socrates recognizes the foolishness of such a motivation. When Callias says that Evenus knows how to teach young people human and political virtue and that he charges five minae for doing so, Socrates replies: "Happy is Evenus if he really has this art and teaches it so reasonably. I myself should be vain and put on airs, if I understood these things" (20b8-c2). The latter claim is obviously not true: if he knew how to make you into a good person, he would supposedly not do so unless you gave him a great deal of money, for he would have too much pride to do it for less. For example, teaching for the amount of money that is paid by a community college would be beneath his dignity; he would demand the respect that would not pay less than a great deal of money. If he knew how to make you into a good person, he would be that full of vanity. No, Socrates cannot be serious; if he knew how to make you into a good person, he would himself be a person of virtue, a person who is good for something.[1] People full of vanity tend to be out of touch with the world around them; to the extent that they are caught up in themselves, they will *not* be good for anything.

Furthermore, people who are full of vanity would not talk about how their vanity would keep them from being generous; such people try to present themselves in the best possible light. Socrates is clearly not being serious. The next question for us is: why would he speak so playfully? What could be the point in pretending that he would be so vain? In any case, it is clear that, in pretending

[1] Brickhouse & Smith accept Socrates' claim at face value, perhaps because they tone it down: "He himself would be very proud to possess the knowledge Evenus claims to have" (*Routledge Philosophy Guidebook*, p. 91).

to be dominated by vanity, he is indicating that he himself is not really dominated by it. He is superior to it.

2. The Sophists Really Do Not Know How to Teach Human and Political Virtue 20c4-e2

Socrates next imagines someone responding to his denial of the stories that implied he was a sophist by saying, "What, then, *have* you been doing, Socrates, to cause this prejudice against you?" (20c4-6). Surely, if he had been like everyone else, those stories about him being a "wise person, who meditates over the things in the air and who has investigated the things beneath the earth, and who makes the weaker argument the stronger" (18b7-c1) would never have arisen. Therefore he must have been doing something out of the ordinary that caused him to have such a reputation.

Before Socrates proceeds to explain from whence his reputation for having such wisdom has come, he takes a parting shot at the sophists. He sets up two types of wisdom, human wisdom and superhuman wisdom, and says of the sophists, "these men, perhaps, of whom I was just speaking, might be wise in some superhuman wisdom" (20d8-e2).[2] These *human beings* might have a wisdom greater than *a human being* can have. This is contradictory; Socrates gives with one hand and takes away with the other. He is really denying that the sophists have the knowledge of how to convey human and political virtue.[3] No human beings can

[2] Vlastos claims that Socrates is referring to the natural philosophers as well as to the sophists when he says "those men of whom I was just speaking" (20d9-e1) (p. 62n). McPherran also holds this view (*The Religion of Socrates*, p. 73n, and "Socratic Piety in the *Euthyphro*," p. 239n). Bruell thinks that Socrates is referring only to the natural philosophers (p. 145). But Socrates has not, in fact, referred to any natural philosophers. He has merely said of natural *philosophy*: "I say this not to cast dishonor upon such knowledge, if anyone is wise about such matters" (19c5-7). Nehamas sees that Vlastos is mistaken (*Virtues of Authenticity*, p. 68).

[3] Kierkegaard sees that Socrates is speaking of the wisdom of the sophists in a skeptical tone (p. 126).

Guthrie sees the basic idea that Socrates is denying that the sophists have the knowledge of how to teach virtue (*A History of Greek Philosophy*, p. 88), but he is later in contradiction with this passage when he claims: "Of course, Socrates believed that there were experts in right and wrong conduct: that was what 'virtue is knowledge' meant ... and he was ready to uphold it at any time by the argument of analogy with crafts" (*A History of Greek Philosophy*, p. 98). But the analogy with crafts does not establish that anyone actually has such knowledge. This can be seen in the fact that in the middle of one such analogy Socrates specifically says: "if there is anyone who knows about such things as the just and the unjust" (*Crito* 47d1-2). Nor is it clear where exactly Socrates equates virtue and knowledge. For example, Paul Shorey defends the claim that virtue is knowledge with references merely to *Euthydemus* 282c and *Laws* 644a (p. 7), neither of which takes us very far at all. Brickhouse & Smith do not defend their claim that Socrates identifies moral knowledge with moral virtue at 30a7-b4 (*Routledge Philosophy Guidebook*, p. 102); indeed their claim is indefensible, for that passage merely identifies virtue with the perfection of one's soul.

Penner thinks that the parallel with divinely inspired poets, exegetes, etc., in other Platonic passages shows that, when Socrates speaks of superhuman wisdom of the sophists, he is saying that the sophists are divinely inspired (p. 138). But if they were divinely inspired, then the point would be that they do not have any wisdom, just as the divinely inspired poets are said not to have wisdom at 22b8-c2.

Brann thinks that Socrates is saying that the sophists (not he) are "the ones who are expert in the things above and below" (pp. 53-54). But Socrates has just finished talking about people who claim to teach human and political virtue. Thus the natural reading is to take 'the wisdom of those men of whom I was just speaking' to refer to this teaching.

Hatzistavrou claims that Socrates is merely saying "it is not possible for one to teach virtue *in the way and for the reasons* [the sophists] claim to do it" (p. 86). But Socrates has not discussed their methods. And he could not be talking about their motive of profit, for Socrates has just finished marveling at how little Evanus charges.

have such wisdom.[4] Socrates will go on to explain that a human being can have only the sort of wisdom that he has, human wisdom (23b2-4), the knowledge that one is worth nothing with respect to wisdom (23a6-7). Only the god is truly wise (23a5-6).

3. An Impossible Explanation of the Origin of Socrates' Mission 20c4-21c2

To explain the cause of his being called a wise man Socrates proceeds to tell a story (22e7-23a3). This story contains a contradiction, and therefore cannot possibly be true. It all supposedly began when his childhood friend, the impetuous Chaerephon, actually went to the Oracle at Delphi and asked whether anyone was wiser than Socrates. When Socrates heard that the Oracle had said that no one was wiser than he, he was supposedly nonplussed: he felt that the Oracle must be wrong, for at that point in his young life he did not feel that he had any wisdom, human or otherwise: "I have no wisdom great or small" (21b4-5). But he also did not think that the god could be speaking falsely, for gods are not permitted to lie

[4] Irwin is not in accord with the text when he says that Socrates' point is that human wisdom is "the only approach to wisdom that is currently available to human beings" (*Plato's Ethics*, p. 28). Socrates is here saying not merely that no one has yet attained to the wisdom of which he is ignorant, but that such wisdom is greater than human. Irwin is also in contradiction with this passage when he claims: "Socrates does not think his elenctic method has made a craftsman [in moral training] out of him, but he does not say whether it could ever produce the kind of craft-knowledge he seeks" (*Plato's Moral Theory*, p. 71).

Zeyl is also in contradiction with this passage when he claims: "Socrates recognizes that valid claims for a virtue-teaching craft can be made" (p. 227).

Reeve is similarly out of accord with this passage when he says that *perhaps* only a god can have such knowledge (p. 38), as are Brickhouse & Smith when they claim that Socrates does not categorically deny that it is possible for humans to have the knowledge of how to produce virtue (*Routledge Philosophy Guidebook*, p. 98).

(21b6-7). He therefore tried to find some hidden meaning in the Oracle's pronouncement. This is an understandable move, because the Oracle was famous for speaking in riddles. Socrates claims that he thought about this problem for a long time and was at a loss as to how to solve it (21b7-8).

But the riddle is not that difficult to solve. Nobody has more wisdom than X; X has no wisdom; ergo … no one has any wisdom.[5] The riddle is made all the easier by the fact that Socrates has just indicated that no human being has the sort of knowledge that the sophists claim to have. (The reason he misses this solution to the riddle seems to be that he does not pay close attention to the Oracle's exact formulation; he takes the claim that no one is wiser than he to mean that he is the wisest [21b5-6].)

Because the riddle is supposedly too much of a conundrum for Socrates to solve, he decides to engage in a course of action that might allow him to discover its solution. Just as we are trying to solve Plato's riddles by trying to show how his arguments go wrong, Socrates sets about trying to solve the Oracle's riddle by trying to show that it is wrong. He intends to search for a counterexample with which to confront the god. If he could find someone who actually has some wisdom, he could say to the god: "You say that no one is wiser than I am, but I know nothing and this person knows something." He does not actually think that he will be able to disprove the Oracle, for he thinks that the gods are not permitted to speak falsely (21b6-7); this is merely his way of addressing the riddle qua riddle. He is hoping that a solution might occur to him as he goes about trying to disprove the riddle.[6]

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[5] Shields points out that the fact that no one is wiser than Socrates does not imply that Socrates was himself wise (p. 359).

[6] Gomez-Lobo (p. 18) and Brickhouse & Smith (*Socrates on Trial*, p. 96, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook* p. 99 [followed by Yonezawa, "Socratic Knowledge and Socratic Virtue," p. 350, and Benson, *Socratic Wisdom*, p 29]) see this.

Missing this possibility, West (p. 106), basically followed by Farness (p. 33n), thinks that Socrates is impiously trying to show up the god as being a liar or a fool.

Calder claims that Socrates' investigation implies disbelief in the god (p. 44). Burnet (p. 92) and Taylor (*Plato: The Man and His Work*, p. 161) think that Socrates is trying to prove the god to be a liar. Sallis similarly claims: "To investigate regarding what the god said is to entertain the possibility ... that it might be a lie" (p. 47). Nietzsche feels that Socrates is putting the god to the test as to whether he has spoken the truth (Spiegelberg, p. 258). Nehamas thinks that the use of the word 'testing' implies a doubting of the truth of the god's statement ("Socrates' Intellectualism," p. 305, *Virtues of Authenticity*, pp. 43-44), as does Strauss (p. 171). Rankin (p. 149) and Foucault (quoted by Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 165) think that Socrates has decided to find out whether or not what the Oracle said was true (p. 149). But the answer to all of these is that Socrates explicitly tells us that he knows the god must be telling the truth (21b6).

Hackforth is similarly incorrect when he claims that Socrates' "testing of the Oracle is incompatible with a serious acceptance of its authority" (p. 94) (as if the only way of taking a religious text seriously were that of fundamentalism). Freydberg is similarly mistaken when he sees Socrates as being hubristic (p. 6). Howland is mistaken when he claims that Socrates' investigation involves either the impious assumption that the god may be lying or the hubristic assumption that the god may be ignorant" (*The Republic*, p. 28). (Following Reeve, Howland later retracts this claim, and sees that Socrates is trying a tactic "that might lead to a clarification of the oracle" [*Kierkegaard and Socrates*, p. 63].) Bruell is mistaken in thinking that its character is "less than completely reverent" (p. 146). Doyle also holds this view (p. 23n).

Teloh distinguishes between the Oracle and the god, saying that Socrates questions the *Oracle* but does not doubt the *god* (p. 111). But the reason for Socrates' puzzlement is that the Oracle's pronouncement *is* a pronouncement of the god, and, for that specific reason, cannot be false.

Guthrie (*Socrates*, p. 87), followed by Brickhouse & Smith ("The Origin of Socrates' Mission," p. 664n), on the other hand, understands that: "Everyone knew it spoke in riddles, and any sensible man or city would look past the obvious meaning for what was hidden underneath." Brumbaugh also recognizes this (p. 32). Gomez-Lobo (p. 123) quotes Heraclitus Frg. B93: "The Lord to whom the Oracle that is in Delphi belongs neither speaks out plainly nor conceals, but gives hints." Reeve quotes Herodotus I. 91-92 on Croesus' misinterpretation of the Oracle: "But as he misinterpreted what was said and made no second inquiry, he must admit the fault to have been his own" (p. 23). Socrates is not committing such a fault.

McPherran sees that Socrates is merely trying to disprove the *apparent meaning* of the pronouncement (*The Religion of Socrates*, p. 224, "Elenctic Interpretation and the Delphic Oracle," p. 129).

Reeve sees that Socrates is not doubting the god's veracity, but he does not understand that Socrates' attempted refutation is a way of addressing the riddle qua riddle. He thinks that Socrates was merely eliminating one possible meaning of the riddle (p. 23). But Socrates' specific problem was that he did not see *any* possible meaning. He initially did not have a clue, and then he subsequently hit upon a scheme from which a clue might emerge.

Colson is incorrect when he claims that the god receives obedience only because his utterances withstand rational scrutiny (p. 52). Socrates' obedience begins with the effort to use rational scrutiny to solve the riddle that he feels the god has posed for him.

McPherran goes beyond the text when he claims that the reason Socrates tries to understand the Oracle is that Socrates is conscious that the Oracle's statement might contain a command ("Socrates and the Duty to Philosophize," p. 543). Socrates is very explicitly explaining his thought processes, and it is merely a matter of feeling compelled to solve the god's riddle. For a long time he was at a loss as to what the god could mean, and then he hit upon way of dealing with the riddle (21b7-9). In a later work McPherran simply sees Socrates' motivation as puzzling "insofar as the Pythia's response to Chaerephon's question is clearly and explicitly descriptive, not prescriptive ("Elenctic Interpretation and the Delphic Oracle," p. 118). But, for example, if you saw clouds spelling out your name and then spelling out that you were the wisest, would you not see this as calling for some response from you? If clouds were famous for speaking in riddles, would not the natural response be to try to solve this riddle? McPherran seems to understand this later in "Elentic Interpretation and the Delphic Oracle" (p. 129n43).

The text offers no justification for Howland's claim that "because he seeks to understand the god, he must examine himself" (*Kierkegaard and Socrates*, p. 62).

The contradiction in all this has to do with the fact that Socrates is claiming that his reputation for being a wise person arose from the activity of trying to disprove what the Oracle had said. This activity itself began when his childhood friend was impetuous enough to go to the Oracle and ask whether anyone was

wiser than he was. The contradiction lies in the fact that he is supposed to be explaining what he did that was different from what other people did and gave rise to his reputation for wisdom (20c4-6). Whatever he was doing that was different from other people had to occur before that time, for he had evidently already done something to make *Chaerephon* think that he was wise.[7] The explanation that

[7] Zeller (p. 45), followed by Daniel & Polansky (p. 84), Riddell (p. xxiv), and Elmore (pp. xxxiii-xxxiv), notes this. Strauss (p. 41), McPherran ("Socrates and the Duty to Philosophize," p. 542), Brickhouse & Smith (*Socrates on Trial*, pp. 94-95), Taylor (*Socrates*, p. 82), Fisher (p. 31), Reeve (p. 28), Yonezawa ("Socrates' Conception of Philosophy," p. 6), Doyle (p. 30), West (p. 107), Hackforth (p. 105), and Forbes (p. 66) all see the problem.

The problem of Chaerophon's motivation causes Gadamer to write: "Now it is as plain as day that Plato's presentation is not to be taken wholly literally" (p. 70). The next move would be to ask why Plato would give us such a false explanation, which is the question I am attempting to answer in this article.

Riddell suggests that the reason for this bogus argument is "to bring the audience a certain distance on their way without the offense which a direct avowal of his purpose would have aroused in their minds" (p. xxiv).

Reeve explains the difficulty away by observing: (1) Socrates does not say that he began to examine people only after he heard what the oracle had said; and (2) he implies that he began his examination of those with a reputation for wisdom at this point—hence, he could have had a prior reputation for wisdom as a result of examining people with no reputation for wisdom (p. 31). But (A) Socrates is here explicitly explaining the origin of his reputation for wisdom (21b1-2), and (B) the artisans he examines at 22c9-e5 as part of his response to the oracle would *not* have a reputation for wisdom.

Colaiaco similarly thinks that it is implied that Socrates "had already been engaged in philosophy and had gained a reputation for considerable wisdom" (p. 57).

McPherran similarly sees Socrates' response to the oracle as merely beginning to do systematically what he had been doing all along (*The Religion of Socrates*, pp. 215-216, "Elenctic Interpretation and the Delphic Oracle," p. 122). But this cannot explain how the prejudice against Socrates arose (21b1-2), for Socrates would surely have made very many enemies through the unsystematic practice of elenchus.

Strauss feels that the explanation is that Socrates had a pre-Delphic wisdom different from his post-Delphic knowledge of his ignorance (p. 410), and Vander Waerdt leans in this direction (p. 5n). But this is not acceptable for Socrates' *immediate* response to the oracle is to assert his lack of wisdom great or small (21b3-5). Furthermore, it would be most unnatural for Socrates to think that the pronouncement that no one is wiser than him means that his pre-Delphic wisdom must not really be wisdom after all. Socrates was already different from other people in his knowledge of his lack of wisdom; He saw himself as lacking (any) wisdom before he had figured out the Oracle's meaning, and he saw himself as lacking (significant) wisdom after he had figured out the Oracle's meaning. That is why he had human wisdom all along, for human wisdom consists in recognizing that one is worth nothing with respect to wisdom (23a5-b4).

Socrates' explanation seems bogus for another reason as well, for, as Elmore writes: "Judging also from Socrates' character, with its deeply laid foundation, it seems unlikely that his life should have been determined by so accidental a circumstance" (p. xxiv). Is it really the case that Socrates would not have acted differently than the people around him if a Chaerephon had not asked such a question?

we are being offered here cannot be the true explanation of how Socrates *first* acquired a reputation for wisdom.

4. The Politicians are All Full of Vanity 21c3-e2

Socrates begins his search with those who have a reputation for wisdom; these would be the most likely candidates for someone wiser than himself. He speaks to such a politician, and finds that this particular politician is indeed not as wise as he is. While neither Socrates nor the politician knows anything fine and good, the politician does not even know that he does not know. Socrates qualifies as being wiser because of one small advantage he has over the politician: he knows of his ignorance (21d3-7).

Socrates' description of the politician, "he seemed to me to seem wise to many other people and especially to himself" (21c6-7), continues the theme of the lack of wisdom of being full of vanity. We saw that there would be a contradiction between being a wise person and being so vain about one's wisdom that one would not teach for less than a large fee. Now the politician's lack of wisdom is made manifest, not merely in the fact that he has the false conceit of being wise, but also in that he has been dwelling on his supposed wisdom to such an extent that he has a higher opinion of his wisdom than has even his entourage. The wisest human will turn out to be the one who avoids this nonsense, for the wisest person knows is the person that knows that he is worth nothing with respect to wisdom (23a5-b4).

5. An Impossible Explanation of Why Socrates Risked Making Enemies 21c8-22a1

After Socrates determined that this particular politician was not wise, he then subsequently tried to show him that he thought himself to be wise but was not, and, as a result, became hateful to him and to many of those present (21c8-d2). He claims that he grieved and feared as he went about making more and more people angry with him, and he tells us that he nonetheless persevered for the rea-

Guthrie's attempt to answer such an objection involves seeing the Oracle's pronouncement as being decisive merely in an incidental way: Socrates' mind could have been almost made up before the pronouncement, and the pronouncement is more or less merely the occasion for his decision to go about questioning people (*Socrates*, pp. 86-87). But then we really do not have an adequate explanation of how his reputation for wisdom began—what is incidental would be being presented by Socrates as being what is essential. Socrates has been very specific about his thought processes, and there is no mention of any previous considerations finding their occasion in the Oracle's pronouncement.

son that he must consider the god's business to be of the highest importance (21e2-4). There is another contradiction here. He is saying that he must continue to arouse people's enmity, because he must go on searching for a counterexample with which to confront the Oracle. Therefore he supposedly must go about finding that people are not wise and then showing them that they are not wise—thus causing them to hate him. The contradiction lies in the fact that he is under no obligation to the god to make the second move; after he realizes that someone will not serve as a counterexample, he is under no obligation to go further and show that person that he is not wise. If Socrates had not made this second move, these people would not be aware that Socrates thought they were not wise, and they would therefore have no reason to hate him.[8] Thus we first had a false explanation of the cause of Socrates' reputation for wisdom, and now we have a false explanation of why he continued to provoke people's hatred. Not only are we in need of the true explanation of his motivation for going about asking people questions, we are now also in need of the true explanation of his motivation for the more specific activity of showing them that they are not wise.

6. Socrates Continues Even After He has Solved the Riddle 23b4-c1

Socrates talks to the poets and to the artisans, and finds that they, too, are not wise but have the conceit of being so. He thus comes to the conclusion that it is likely that only the god is wise and that the wisest person is the one who realizes

[8] Stokes suggests that the words 'and then' do not necessarily imply a temporal sequence here at 21c8-d2, and thus that the process of detecting someone's ignorance could be identical to the process of demonstrating it (p. 41). But, even though a temporal sequence is not necessarily implied here, the fact that the identical sequence at 23b6-7 ("and when he does not seem wise to me, I give aid to the god and show that he is not") *is* a temporal sequence, indicates that a temporal sequence is being referred to here as well.

McPherran tries to solve the problem by seeing Socrates as having the two-fold motivation of serving the god *and* serving his fellow humans (*The Religion of Socrates*, p. 219n): first Socrates serves the god by determining that people are not wise, and then he puts himself at risk by subsequently trying to do them the favor of making them aware of their ignorance. But this will not resolve the contradiction, for it is specifically Socrates' duty to the god that he says puts him at risk—unless Socrates is referring to an *unstated, additional* duty to the god to serve fellow humans.

Howland claims that this additional step contributes to Socrates' attempt to understand the Oracle, because, had the politician been willing to recognize his own ignorance, "he would have proved to be no less wise than Socrates" (*Kierkegaard and Socrates*, p. 63). But the issue is not whether or not someone can become as wise as (or, more properly, wiser than) Socrates, the issue is whether anyone *is* as wise as Socrates.

that he is worth nothing with respect to wisdom (23a5-b4).[9] The wisest are the ones who realize that their wisdom is nothing about which to be vain.

He goes on to say: "Therefore I still, even now, go about searching and investigating people at the god's behest" (23b4-5). There are two problems with this explanation. (1) Now that Socrates has solved the riddle, there would seem to be no reason to think that the god requires him to continue searching for counterexamples in order to try to solve the riddle.[10] (He seems to be drawing attention to

[9] Howland claims that the expression, "only the god is wise," means that Socrates can learn from God (*Kierkegaard and Socrates*, p. 64), but the contrast with human wisdom shows that it means merely that God has the wisdom that people think they have, but lack.

[10] Hackforth sees this difficulty (p. 90). He thinks that Plato, in his effort to have Socrates' life be thought of as being under a divine master, *unintentionally* had Socrates contradict himself (pp. 91-92). But surely Plato was a very intelligent man, and therefore it is better to give him the benefit of a doubt.

McPherran holds that Socrates continued in order to rule out the belief that the Oracle might have said anything false ("Elenctic Investigation and the Delphic Oracle," p. 134). This cannot be correct, for Socrates takes the impossibility of the god saying anything false as a given (21b6-7).

Robinson ("Elenchus," p. 86, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, p. 13), Guthrie (*Socrates*, p. 88), and McPherran ("Socrates and the Duty to Philosophize," p. 543) see Socrates continuing because, having learned the lesson that no man is wise, he felt it to be the god's will that he should impart it to others. But Socrates could hardly think that he could impart such a lesson merely by showing people that they are ignorant. Indeed, the characteristic result of his activity is the opposite: "the people present thought I was wise in the matter in which I confuted someone else" (23a3-5). He must have had some other reason for showing people that they did not know what they were doing with their lives. O'Connell similarly holds that Socrates continues to serve the god "by demonstrating the worthlessness of merely human wisdom" (p. 38); Yonezawa sees this as "believable" ("Socrates's Conception of Philosophy," p. 7).

I can make no sense of Benson's claim that the Delphic Oracle confirms for Socrates that his search for knowledge, even though it has thus far been unsuccessful, is worthy of pursuit ("The Priority of Definition," p. 64n).

Burnet claims that, now that Socrates has discovered the true meaning of the Oracle, he has become the champion of the god (p. 97). But how would continuing to search for a counterexample to what the god had said, be championing the god? I suppose Burnet is thinking that Socrates' failure to find a counterexample is continuing to prove that the Oracle was correct. That would mean that championing the god is the same as demonstrating the worthlessness of human wisdom. As we saw above, this would mean that Socrates continued to produce the opposite result from that which he intended.

McPherran hits the mark when he sees Socrates continuing the investigation because the *Euthyphro* indicates that it is pious to assist the gods in their work and the gods "probably" wish to promote the establishment of goodness in the world ("Socrates and the Duty to Philosophize," p. 543). But he misses the mark when he thinks that part of Socrates' motivation is that, whenever anyone claims to possess greater wisdom than Socrates, it is then Socrates' duty to defend the truthfulness of the gods by revealing the falsity of their claim (*The Religion of Socrates*, pp. 227-228). Even in the beginning this was not Socrates' motivation. He initially took for granted the truthfulness of the god and was merely trying to understand the meaning of something that—because it appeared to be false—must be a riddle. Why, now that he sees the hidden meaning of what the god had said, should he have the new motivation of defending the truthfulness of the god?

this problem by emphasizing that he is doing this "even now.") It is true that here he merely says that his explanation of the riddle is "likely" (23a5), but his original reason for trying to solve the riddle was that he was *at a loss* as to what the god might mean (21b7-8). Now that he thinks he has a likely solution for the riddle, why should he think that the god is still requiring him to search for a solution?[11] (2) Initially he felt personally addressed by the Oracle, but now he feels that the use of his name was arbitrary: "He does not really say this of Socrates, but merely uses my name, and makes me an example" (23a7-b1). If he no longer feels personally addressed, he would have no reason to think that the god is imposing a task upon him.

As Socrates describes the activity that he continues to perform, he says that he "gives aid to the god and shows people that they are not wise" (23b7). But we have already seen that this does not follow from the god giving him the task of finding a counterexample with which to disprove the Oracle: if his task is merely to find someone who has more wisdom than he has, then making the further move of showing people that they are not wise (and consequently making them angry with him) would not be required.[12] Perhaps Socrates feels that he has a further duty to God to show people they are not wise.

7. What Socrates is Really Trying to Accomplish (23c8-d1)

By giving us so many contradictory explanations of why Socrates went about questioning people, Plato seems to be challenging us to discover the true explanation of his motivation.

What Socrates was trying to accomplish by showing people that they are not wise is indicated in what he next describes: people respond to his young imitators by becoming angry with him rather than with themselves (23c8-d1). That is, when Socrates makes that extra—and seemingly unnecessary—move of showing people that they are not wise, he evidently wants them to respond by becoming angry with themselves. As he says at 39d3-8, the most honorable way of escaping reproach because one does not act as one should is by making oneself as good as possible. Anger with oneself would provide the motivation for trying to do better.

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[11] Stokes sees the remaining uncertainty (Socrates merely says that his explanation is "likely") as explaining why Socrates continues to examine people, even after he thinks he has solved the riddle (pp. 44-47)—i.e., Socrates wants to be sure. But surely Socrates would be aware that an empirical investigation will never give certainty.

[12] Reeve notes that Socrates speaks of himself as coming to the aid of the god only at the stage at which he tries to get the interlocutor to recognize his own lack of wisdom, *not* at the stage of determining that the interlocutor lacks wisdom (p. 28).

In Shakespeares' *Twelfth Night* Feste says that he is the better for his foes and the worse for his friends, because his friends "praise me and make an ass of me; now my foes tell me plainly I am an ass; so that by my foes, sir, I profit in the knowledge of myself, and by my friends I am abused" (V, I, 12-23). If you realize that you are being an ass, then the proper thing to do is face up to the truth, be angry with yourself, and try to do better. But, if you care more about the status of your ego than you do about the quality of your life, then you will respond by seeing as a foe the person who is telling you that you are an ass. As Socrates goes on to say of the people who became angry with him instead of with themselves, "they are jealous of their honor" (23d9-e1).[13] (That praise would make an ass of me would follow from Socrates' claim that the greater our reputation for wisdom the greater is our conceit of wisdom [22a2-6].) Socrates is trying to find those people who are capable of caring more about the quality of their lives than they do about the quality of their reputations. He is doing them a favor—truly befriending them—in showing them that they are not really wise.

8. The Argument that Socrates Has Been Sent from the God 31a7-b7

Later in the dialogue Socrates presents an argument that attempts to demonstrate that he has been sent from the god: (1) he has neglected all his own affairs and has been enduring the neglect of them all these years; and (2) he is always busy in their interest, coming to each of them individually like a father or an elder brother and urging them to care for virtue; (3) this is supposedly not like human conduct; hence (4) he has been sent from the god (31a8-b5).[14]

Over and above the fact that there is no way that even a Jesus could demonstrate that he has been sent from the god (performing miracles would not really be sufficient), the invalidity of this demonstration can be shown in a number of ways.[15]

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[13] Trundle thinks that people are blaming Socrates for the excesses of the sophists (p. 81). But (1) they are upset by Socrates' followers, rather than by the sophists, and (2) they accuse him of being a sophist for the specific reason that they do not know of what else they can accuse him (23d2-7).

Vlastos sounds naïve to me: "Even extreme exasperation at such harassment could not have led one of its victims to indict Socrates for an offense punishable by death" (p. 21).

[14] Hatzistavrou's suggestion that Socrates is merely saying "that it is not *typical* of the average man to neglect his own affairs" (p. 86) makes the argument that he must have been sent from god invalid on its surface.

[15] Russon sees the absurdity of the proof (p. 404).

(i.) There are many human beings who neglect their own affairs; they are generally called bums. Just because a bum exhorts you to care about virtue, does not mean that he has been sent from the god.

(ii.) Socrates has been teaching that we should never think about the possible consequences of our actions, but merely think about what the just thing to do might be (28b5-c1). People who lived Socrates' way therefore would necessarily be neglecting their own private concerns: rather than trying to bring about some benefit to themselves, they would merely be trying to respond justly to their situations. That does not mean they have been sent from the god, for they could merely be trying to follow the teachings of Socrates.

Socrates goes on to say that, if he had received some pay for this activity, then there might have been some sense in it (31b5-7). But, again, this is in contradiction with that teaching of 28b5-c1 that we should never think about anything except whether or not we are acting justly. If we started basing our actions on what we think we can get out of our situations for ourselves, we would be falling away from that high principle.

(iii.) It might not be human to go about like a father or elder brother exhorting people to virtue, but, if Socrates actually cared about the people of Athens as fathers or elder brothers care for their relatives, then it would be human for him to do as he has been doing. For example, in *David Copperfield* Mr. Peggotty searches all over Europe, neglecting his other private affairs, to look for his missing niece. Socrates does not have to be sent from the god to do as he has been doing; all that is required is that he care about people as much as Mr. Peggotty cared for his niece.

The fact that Socrates suggests a counterexample to his own argument—that he is acting as a father or elder brother might act—seems to show that he is aware that his argument is invalid. Indeed, Socrates seems to be doing more than merely indicating a hypothetical counterexample; for surely the counterexample which he himself indicates would be the one which shows his true motivation: it follows that he has been going about talking to people on the streets of Athens because he cares about each citizen of Athens as he would care about his son or his younger brother.[16] He fits his own description of good rulers in the *Republic*:

[16] Bussanich sees that Socrates is displaying the friendship of a close relative (p. 205).

Rappe is mistaken when she concludes from this passage: "Evidently he feels the same concern for the well-being of everyone he meets, including foreigners, as he would if they were members of his own family" (p. 15). Socrates indicates at 30a2-4 that the degree of responsibility he feels for someone corresponds to how closely related they are to him. The fact that he cares about his fellow citizens the way most of us would only care about our fellow family members does not indicate that he cares about them just as much as he cares about the more closely related members of his own family.

Weiss is similarly out of accord with 30a2-4 when she claims that it is toward the Athenians rather than to his own children that Socrates adopts the role of father or elder brother (p. 26).

McPherran uses *Crito* 49e-52d to deduce that Socrates cares about the state as a child cares about his or her parents, and thus he examines people for the sake of preventing them from harming the state ("Elenctic Interpretation and the Delphic Oracle," p. 130-131). But that argument in the *Crito* is so full of fallacious reasoning that it must be another example of Plato making mistakes on purpose. (For example, the laws of marriage did *not* bring Socrates into existence [*Crito* 50d1-2], for sometimes married people do not choose to have children.).

"They must look upon the commonwealth as their special concern—the sort of concern that is felt for something so closely bound up with oneself that its interests and fortunes, for good or ill, are held to be identical with one's own" (*Republic* 412d4-7). If he cares about his fellow citizens the way most of us care only for fellow family members, it would be natural for him, when he sees them living lives that are so full of vanity that they are not worth living, to try to help them by trying to get them to become angry with themselves for being so foolish. They might not be big enough to face up to what he says to them and therefore might become angry with him instead, but he is willing to take that chance in the hope that each new person might be one who is capable of actually caring sufficiently about the quality of his own life. The reason he puts himself at risk is that he cares about the people to whom he is exposing their own ignorance.

9. Conclusion

Socrates has another reason as well for going about talking with people. He makes a point of having a twofold motivation as he explains why he would not keep quiet if he were to be exiled: "[1] if I were to keep quiet it would be disobedience to the god..., and [2] to talk everyday about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking and examining myself and others is the greatest good to humanity" (*Apology* 37e5-38a5). We are now in a position to see that the disobedience to God would not refer to obeying the implicit command of the Oracle of Delphi. It would be a result of the other commands he refers to when he says, "I have been commanded to do this by the god through oracles and dreams and in every way in which any man was ever commanded by divine power to do anything whatsoever" (33c4-7). Indeed the fact that he is not referring to the Oracle of Delphi greatly accentuates the importance of this passage. It leads one to wonder how Socrates could have such a thoroughgoing knowledge of the god that he would know that the god has no more arrows in his quiver, that the god has never at any time employed a means of communication which he has not employed with Socrates.

We are now also in a better position to appreciate the motivating force of his talk being the greatest good for humanity. Merely because something is the greatest good for others does not mean that I will do it to the neglect of my own good. But we have seen that Socrates neglects his own affairs because he cared about people as a father or elder brother might care. He wanted them to become angry with themselves, and thereby be motivated to make themselves be as good as possible.

Plato could have said these things in just a few lines, but he chose to make us work to see it by writing in a series of riddles. In going through the effort to solve the riddles we became engaged with his words in a more thoroughgoing way. He is trying to help us read with what Husserl calls "distinct judgements." Rather than the reader making a confused judgment and thinking, "Plato is making that kind of move," he or she is given the opportunity of following the exact movements of Plato's thought. We are thus guided to a true appropriation of what he is saying. For example, by having us deal with the issue of why Socrates was willing to risk evoking the enmity of those who will eventually kill him, we can have a deeper appreciation of what it means to love someone with the sort of concern that is felt for something so closely bound up with oneself that this person's interests and fortunes, for good or ill, are held to be identical with one's own. Socrates is really similar to Jesus, who loved sinners as he loved himself.

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