

Socrates or The Baby and the Bathwater

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Three widely differing modern interpretations of Socrates are analyzed together with a failure common to all three. Had the Marxist F. Stone, the rationalist K.R. Popper, and the Catholic R. Guardini paid attention to the true nature of Socrates' argumentation in Phaedo, they would have noticed his historic mistake. It was to throw out the baby (science) with the bathwater (mechanistic philosophy). The mistake became corrected in a culture steeped in the cult of the Babe born in Bethlehem.

Jesus and Socrates

That every book is autobiographical is the substance of a longer observation in Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, a spiritual biography in spite of its title.¹ The remark has some applicability even to the four canonical biographies of the Word made Flesh. The young man who in Mark's Gospel lets his nightgown be grabbed by Jesus' captors and runs away naked is very likely Mark himself. Had Luke not been a physician, he might not have paid special attention to the miraculous healings performed by Jesus.

That Jesus aimed above all at a moral healing of man and taught it most effectively by His own death has always been the principal reason for drawing a parallel between him and Socrates. Nothing extols more justly the greatness of Socrates than Kierkegaard's apparent slighting of him: "If God had not come himself, all the relations would have remained on the Socratic level."²

For the level was very high, and certainly so intellectually. Each of the great Greek philosophical schools — the Platonists, the Aristotelians, the Epicurean atomists, and the Stoics to all of whom Western thought owes so much — took Socrates for inspiration. There were, of course, other war heroes like Socrates, there were other men of wisdom, there were others who died bravely though perhaps not with the same calm as he did. But no one from classical antiquity is remembered as having matched Socrates' resolve to avoid, as if it were "the poisonous bite of a Tarantula,"³ the vice of homosexuality in which the classical world saw the noblest form of love.

On this point no ancient or modern critic charged Xenophon, whose writings on Socrates constitute one of the two chief surviving sources, for having injected himself into Socrates' story. But in many other respects Xenophon was very much "autobiographical," a reason why his writings on Socrates have been much less commented upon than is the case with the other chief source, Plato's four dialogues known as *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*. Yet even these have not been immune to the charge that they are more the record of Plato's ideas than of Socrates.

Undoubtedly it was Socrates who drank the hemlock and not Plato, doubtful as one may be about the motivations which Plato ascribes to Socrates for that heroic act. The variety of motivations ascribed to Socrates in the remote and recent past may seem to constitute a further proof of the validity of Butler's remark. It should be enough to take the very different views offered on Socrates by three such different thinkers and personalities as Stone, Popper, and Guardini. Yet they are at one in missing something most decisive in the thinking of Socrates in reference to his death, the very point to be explored in this essay because of its great cultural significance.

A Marxist Socrates

As to the recent American bestseller, *The Trial of Socrates*, its thesis may appear a foregone conclusion if one recalls that its author earned his living for much of his life as the editor of *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, a muckraking leftist New York journal. At the very start of his book Stone voices his hope about the eventual realization of a social system in which Marx and Jefferson are the two leading lights.

Plato has always been high on the list of compulsory readings for Marxists. Plato's ideal state as described in the *Republic* and the *Laws* could easily appear as an anticipation of regimented Marxist society. Since it is regimented, it has also to be elitist, a point which Marxists try in vain to gloss over. But for Stone, Socrates is not

only an elitist but also a most skillful elitist who goads the working-democracy of Athens into condemning him to death for exercising the basic right of democracy which is free speech: "Socrates looks more like a picador enraging a bull than a defendant trying to mollify the jury."⁴

Marxist writers have always loved working in democracies that worked. Obviously, it is in their best interest to discredit anyone who either by his arguments or by his outstanding comportment exposes their double standards which is to take full advantage of a working democracy while doing their best to undermine it. Not one of them likes to recognize boomerangs in those very weapons that were supposed to serve as foolproof instruments for bringing about the ultimate triumph of the proletariat. Champions of *perestroika* must have nightmares on realizing that today they are beaten with their most vaunted strategy or technique.

Have not those champions been taught that the tools of production determine the outcome of history? Are they not at last seeing that Marxism is being beaten by the new physics and the semiconductor technology built on it? Is it not evident that the technology in question can be developed and kept explosively productive only through the free flow of information, the very last thing compatible with a closed society?

But these are precisely the points not seen by Stone, a political ideologue and a stranger to science and technology. Consequently, Stone makes the preposterous claim that Socrates chose death because he was tired of life.⁵ Stone deliberately slights what Socrates really looked for and the principal argument he afforded on behalf of that outlook. The latter has an eerie relevance for this scientific age, which Stone and other humanists, Marxists as well as Christians, still have to discover. But this is to anticipate.

A Popperian Socrates

It may seem more puzzling that the argument in question was completely missed by Popper whom many in our times take for the definitive philosopher of science. The points of definitive validity which, according to Popper, are made by Socrates can readily be gathered from Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Among the points are the principle of falsifiability and Socrates' commitment to teaching "that the spirit of science is criticism."⁶ But if Socrates was so Popperian and so intent on science, the extent of his knowledge of the science of his time must have been considerable.

Popper's failure to raise the question about that extent and probe into it should seem baffling for several reasons. One is that Popper admits only one philosophy, namely the one which has science for its sole object. Another reason is that Socrates was very much concerned about science. In fact science was Socrates' supreme concern in his supreme hour. To ignore that concern of Socrates should seem all the more serious if one is to grant at least a modicum of truth to a remark of Xenophon suggesting the very opposite. According to Xenophon, Socrates recommended to his followers the study of astronomy only insofar as it provided useful information for everyday life: "To continue the study of astronomy so far as to distinguish the bodies which do not move in the same circle with the heaven, the planets, and the irregular stars, and to weary ourselves in inquiring into their distances from the earth, the periods of their revolutions, and the causes of all these things, was what he greatly discountenanced."⁷

Popper's failure to consider Socrates' real concern about science may suggest that perhaps Popper's own chief concern is not so much the criticism of science but criticism for the sake of criticism. Such a criticism can serve as a sophisticated foil against facing up to points of fundamental validity. It should be no secret to anyone familiar with *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* that whenever Popper faces up to criticism as a means for establishing a truth to which all must bow, he sidesteps the issue. He does not want to cast a vote on behalf of that closed society which sets limits, in the name of universally valid truths and norms, to the individual's unbridled pursuit of his own individualism.

Popper holds high individualism as he identifies Socrates' foremost leading principle as the conviction that "it is better to be a victim of injustice than to inflict it upon others." Then Popper adds: "I think it is this last doctrine which can help us best to understand the core of his teaching, his creed of individualism, his belief in the human individual as an end in himself."⁸

Of course, Popper does not mean by this anything similar to the Christian conviction about the sacredness of the individual. At any rate, Popper holds that Socrates' death was the ultimate proof of his sincerity. "He showed that a man could die, not only for fate and fame and other grand things of this kind, but also for the freedom of critical thought," if not for the principle of falsification, one would be tempted to add. Popper injects into the story of Socrates' death his own thinking about democracy as an "open society." In fact he injects himself into that story so deeply as to see only his thoughts in the most decisive turn of that story, which comes when Socrates is given the

opportunity to escape. According to Popper, had Socrates seized that opportunity “and become an exile, everybody would have thought him an opponent of democracy. So he stayed and stated his reasons.”⁹

In recounting those reasons Popper is not at all eager to dwell on the overriding perspective and preoccupation of Socrates: the individual soul’s eternal responsibility. The latter meant for Socrates either an eternal peace of mind, or a never ceasing remorse of conscience. Moreover, Socrates was ready to probe fully the materialist (and therefore Popperian) objection to the soul’s immortality. The essence of the objection, in Socrates’ very words, was a particular interpretation of “the subject of the causes of generation and decay,”¹⁰ a subject undoubtedly scientific. And possibly because Socrates made even more unscientific whatever was scientific in the contemporary understanding of that subject, Popper had to pass over the matter, lest he make appear ridiculous his presentation of Socrates as a champion of the scientific spirit.

An Idealist Socrates

Romano Guardini, another important modern interpreter of Socrates’ trial and death, certainly cannot be suspected of being uneasy about the question of the immortality of the soul. With his book, *The Death of Socrates*, he hoped to lead a modern world, but especially his adopted country, Germany, devastated and decimated by World War II, to the vision of something in man that survives death. Guardini tried to achieve this most noble aim by reconstructing as closely as possible Socrates’ state of mind in the process of taking one step after another toward his being condemned to death and the implementation of his death sentence. Guardini proceeds most meticulously. He offered, with many quotations, a step by step analysis of *Euthyphro*, of the *Apology*, of *Crito*, and of *Phaedo*, all with subheadings, lest anything be missed by the reader as the interpretation develops. Guardini’s reader will, however, miss the crucial point by being endlessly reminded of the Platonic essence or *eidos*.

In *Euthyphro* Socrates allows Euthyphro to suspect that he, Socrates, is not in quest of a particular form of piety but of its essence. It is the question of essence which for Guardini is, and rightly so, the basic idea in those four dialogues. It reappears in Socrates’ three defense speeches, recorded in the *Apology*, in reference to truth and to the duty to speak truthfully in harmony with that divine voice that speaks through man’s conscience. Even more so does the idea of essence take the center stage in *Crito*, especially when Socrates declines the offer to make use of the opportunity to escape. His reason is that the act of escaping would contradict his very essence which is manifested in his life-long commitment to solving ethical problems.

It is here that the immortality of that essence or soul comes into sharpest focus, a point that dominates *Phaedo* throughout. It does so both through the objections of Cebes and Simmias to the immortality of the soul and through Socrates’ replies. Socrates first tries to prove the soul’s immortality from the principle of the generation of opposites. Socrates’ friends remain unimpressed by his reference to the Egyptian practice of embalming the body as suggestive of the soul’s immortality. He makes no better impression on them by referring to the mind’s ability to recall ideal, that is, essential forms or absolute forms of things which cannot be seen by bodily eyes.

Socrates himself realizes that a far better argument is needed. That it will be such is signalled by Guardini through the subheading, “The answer to Cebes and the decisive argument.”¹¹ To call that argument “decisive” certainly fits the existentialist setting in which Socrates presents it. The setting reveals him to be at a decisive stage of his life, indeed at a point where he turns from youth into man, in more than one sense.

Socrates recalls that as a young man he had a passionate desire for the wisdom which he hoped to find in the study of physical science. But he obviously needed a shock, a sudden disillusion, if he was to extricate himself from the trap in which his infatuation with physical science had landed him. The blow came from his hearing somebody read aloud a book, called *Mind*, by Anaxagoras, the latest and most impressive among pre-Socratic *physikoi*. Young Socrates eagerly listened in the hope that finally he would hear of a physics which explains processes with a reference to a mind which always acts for a purpose and therefore accounts in the deepest possible sense for the question why this and that happens: “If we wish to discover the cause of the generation or destruction or existence of a thing we must discover how it is *best* for that thing to exist, or to act, or to be acted on” (italics added).¹²

But as he was sitting on the bed in the cell in which he was soon to drink the hemlock, he recalled that he had had “all his splendid hopes dashed.” To illustrate the haplessness he had felt as a young man, he assured his friends that on the basis of the enlightenment provided by physics he would have long ago escaped: “For, by the dog of Egypt, I think that these muscles and bones would long have been in Megara or Boeotia, prompted by their opinion of what is best, if I had not thought it better and more honourable to submit myself to whatever penalty the state inflicts, rather than escape by flight.”¹³

After quoting these lines from *Phaedo*, Guardini offers his comment: Socrates went to the philosophers of nature with fundamental philosophical questions about the existence of things and their origin. In listing those questions Guardini does not mention the one about the purpose of things or about their being for their very best. Socrates had to find, Guardini states, that those philosophers understood by their looking for the arrangement of things by reason or the Mind “the reference of empirical phenomena to ultimate, metaphysically conceived constituents, such as water, air, fire, and so forth.” In Guardini’s reconstruction those philosophers “practised, therefore, a kind of mythological physics — and Socrates got no answer to his questions.”¹⁴ He had to realize, Guardini continues, that questions about beings and their nature “cannot be deduced from any analysis of their component parts.” He is in the prison because “he has come to see clearly the ethical *eidōs* which contains both the imperative, that which ought to be, and the ‘best’ for himself, that is, the meaningful.”¹⁵

The rest of Guardini’s comment is an elaboration on the *eidōs* or the Platonic substance which as such has to be immortal. It is a comment that signally fails to do justice to the fact that Socrates did not want merely to restate his belief in the immortality of the soul with a reference, however dramatic, to his youthful experience, but wanted to give, in Guardini’s very words, a “decisive argument.”

The decisive argument

That Guardini was to miss that decisive argument was foreshadowed by his failure to quote from *Phaedo* a crucial passage of over twenty lines that precede Socrates’ reference to his dashed hopes. The passage is introduced by Socrates’ remark, already quoted, that Anaxagoras’ reference to Mind as the guiding principle of Nature could only mean that a true physics of Nature should find everything in Nature arranged for the best. The passage makes it clear that Socrates found most valuable a physics in which the principal concern is not, for instance, whether the earth is spherical and in the center of the universe, but whether both features are *best* for the earth. Socrates recalled that he also wanted to learn from Anaxagoras why was it best for the sun, the moon, and the stars to do their revolutions as they did. He was disappointed all the more so because he felt to be shortchanged by Anaxagoras on the all important point of what the role of mind, or understanding, was ultimately about: “I never thought that, when he said that things are ordered by Mind, he would introduce any reason for their being as they are, except that they are best so.”¹⁶

Socrates (or Plato) utterly failed to realize that his identification of understanding as a means of registering purpose and, consequently, as a decisive proof of the immortality of the individual soul, was to undermine the credibility of his argumentation. It was also to steer, by the same stroke, discourse about nature into a bottomless morass. The latter is usually the product of equivocations or of misplaced analogies, in this case the heedless application of the same word “best” to inanimate and animate, and in fact, to spiritual acts. And since Guardini did not have for his expertise that discourse, or science, and much less its history, he failed to note Socrates’ failure and the enormous threat it posed to culture. Yet Guardini’s own German cultural ambience should have alerted him to that threat. Was it not the German idealists — Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel — who tried to replace Newtonian physics with a physics of purposes in which not a single paragraph was free of absurdities?¹⁷

In offering his “decisive” argument Socrates performed a most un-Socratic, that is, unwise turn, a turn with fateful consequences for Greek as well as early Western intellectual history. What that “decisive” argument led to has been taken very lightly by almost all readers of *Phaedo* except some very attentive ones. Of course, the reader must be especially attentive, which is not an easy task for most readers of Platonic dialogues, full of repetitions and conversationalist platitudes. Their attention may already be flagging by the time they reach the point in *Phaedo* where Socrates suddenly changes tactics. Instead of developing in full his “decisive” argument, foreshadowed in his questions about what was best for the earth, the sun and other bodies, he begs for licence to shift to another argument, which he calls “the second string to my bow.”¹⁸ He merely plucks again an old string as he waxes prolific on the idea of an absolute that alone explains any class of existents insofar as they embody such general properties as beauty, quantity, good, and so forth.

Plato’s occasional sophistry, if not wishful thinking, is nowhere more visible in the entire *Phaedo* than in his portrayal of Cebes’ surrender to a proof of the immortality of the soul which he had already rejected. Plato’s only excuse may lie in the fact that he had written *Phaedo* a decade or two before he wrote *Timaeus*. There he speaks of the universe as an animated being acting for its own good which he leaves unspecified. Yet the pages which in *Phaedo* immediately precede Socrates’ preparation for death, Plato puts in Socrates’ mouth a myth in which one can recognize that *good* about which Socrates had just claimed that he could not find out either from others or from himself.

The myth is about the interior of the earth, full of streams and cavities, so many passage ways and abodes for the souls according to their good or bad record.¹⁹ In other words, the only good that can be meaningfully known about the earth or physical reality in general is, according to Socrates, a markedly spiritual or, rather, biological or organismic metaphor. The only question that should be asked about physical reality is its suggesting, and in a rather primitive manner, the eternal good of the soul or its eternal punishment. It was that perspective that in Socrates' eyes justified decisively his belief in the immortality of the soul and made him ready to drink the hemlock. A classic case of an anti-reductionist trying to achieve his aim by endorsing a different kind of reductionism.

Antiscientific failure of nerve

Socrates drank the poison without losing composure even for a moment, an undoubtedly heroic act. Yet the reasoning underlying that act included a failure of nerve with respect to the investigation of physical reality. The impact which Socrates made on classical antiquity and beyond always carried with it that failure, or an absence of what William James memorably called "tough-minded" mentality. All major intellectual trends of post-Socratic antiquity are an example.

The most obvious case is that of the Epicureans. For all their fondness for atomism, they initiated no systematic search into the constitution of matter or a consistent discourse about an atomistically constituted universe. They did not because of their fear that thereby they would deprive existence of purpose. The Stoics let the universe be subject to periodic conflagrations while they bravely tried to find purpose in cosmic ashes. The Platonists, especially their brand initiated by Plotinus, tried to find purpose in a process which suggested the very opposite: They as a man shied away from the physical universe as an object of inquiry with any purpose. Plotinus was in particular praised by his biographer, Porphyry, for cultivating only the theoretical parts of the sciences.

Even the Aristotelians, whose leader so resolutely pointed at the terrestrial ground as the starting point of all knowledge, failed to break out of the perspective set by Socrates. With Aristotle too the primary questions about purpose could only be saved if all is supposed to be permeated with purpose. Such is the basis of Aristotle's doctrine of natural places and natural motions, a doctrine that put the study of physics into a straitjacket for almost two millennia.²⁰ It was no accident that Aristotle discussed the free fall of bodies in terms of their nature or propensities. Worse, he gave a quantitative touch to that intellectually perverse enterprise of his. A body, so Aristotle claims in *On the Heavens*, which has twice as much mass as another body, will fall twice as fast toward the center of the earth, its natural place owing to its twice larger nature or propensity.²¹

Aristotle's reasoning was perverse not only because it flew in the face of everyday evidence, but also because it revealed some perversity in man's nature. The perversity consists in man's inability to show intellectual humility in the face of the fact that man's knowledge of reality has various aspects that conceptually cannot be reduced to one another. Why, one may ask, did Socrates fail to oppose Anaxagoras with a *distinguo*: the mechanistic (quantitative) features of things and processes were one thing, an exclusively mechanistic philosophy of existence another. Could Socrates not have espoused the former while rejecting the latter?

The baby and the bathwater

The question is the one about the baby and bathwater. Was it necessary to throw out the baby, or the quantitative study of matter, just because that study was immersed in a dirty bathwater which, in this case, was not even of the baby's own making? Should it not have been obvious to separate the two and save the quantitatively exact study of matter as a most valuable enterprise?

Had Socrates and his many admirers perceived this, intellectual as well as political history would have been very different. As to the former, thinking about scientific method might not have become restricted to the principle of "saving the phenomena" which barred the consideration of real physical causes. For that restriction the lop-sided Socratic program of "saving purpose" bears a heavy responsibility.

As to political history, it should be enough to consider the following question: What if the colonizing urge of the Greeks had gone hand in hand with expertise in the science of motion, or specifically in the science of ballistics? About the latter even an Archimedes had only some practical rules and, what is most important, he loathed being involved in constructing machines. The statics of floating bodies he developed meant no breakthrough toward that science which becomes true to itself only by dealing successfully with that physical world all of whose parts are constantly in motion.

The Babe behind the baby

That there lay a moral failure behind the Greeks' inability to give birth to science, which is either the science of motion or hardly science at all, is amply brought out by scientific history. The first of Newton's three laws of motion was formulated in a medieval theological context, which, let us not forget, is always a context of divine grace aimed at healing man's various failings, of which one of them is the failure to see the obvious and all too often to resist it. It is against this background that one should see Buridan's epoch-making commentaries on Aristotle's *On the Heavens*, which is a most systematic celebration of the eternity and divinity of the cosmos and a relentless unfolding of some stupefying "scientific" consequences of that cosmic vision.

In rejecting Aristotle's claim about the eternity of the universe, Buridan was sustained by a long Christian tradition about the creation of the universe out of nothing and in time. Buridan, however, went one step further than the theologians by also asking the question about the *how* of the beginning of all motion. Duhem's great pioneering studies, now almost a century old, of Buridan's feat and its impact on Copernicus, Descartes, and Galileo, and indirectly on Newton, cannot be reviewed here in detail.²² Let it merely be noted that Buridan's belief in creation out of nothing and in time was a Christian belief, a belief rooted in the Babe of Bethlehem.²³

As a Christian, Buridan believed in that Babe as the only begotten Son of God. In and through that belief Buridan had a powerful safeguard against the temptation of taking the universe for a begetting, that is, for an emanation from the divine principle. That temptation of pantheism, to which all pagans of classical antiquity fell a ready prey, ruined their religion as well as their science. To that temptation Jewish and Muslim scholars put up a far from convincing opposition.

It should therefore be easy to understand that in these modern or post-Christian times, so heavily infected with pantheism, one witnesses the Socratic "turn" both in its original form and also in its reverse. In its original form it is resurrected by the proliferation of cosmic gnosticism which is all too often the ideology behind sundry efforts to save the earth from ecological threats. In its reverse the Socratic turn is at work in the infatuation with quantitative patterns which in our times all too often serves as an excuse for ignoring considerations about purpose and values. Patterns, invariably quantitative or statistical, serve as justification for outright contempt for values, especially for ones hallowed by Christian moral tradition.

Indeed, post-Christian modern man finds it practically impossible to recognize the respective rights of quantitative considerations as well as of genuine value judgments. Engrossed with patterns, which he takes for substitutes for values, modern man throws out the baby of pure values, a baby invisible in the dirty water of scientific reductionism. Modern man's predicament has been aggravated by many wrong cures which unwittingly point to the only effective remedy: It consists in a surrender to that Babe who as the Master from Nazareth challenged reductionism at its very core. He did so by pointing out the respect due to both sides of the tax coin or of any real coin for that matter. In doing so He set the pattern for a turn to which mankind, if it is to save its very purpose, must constantly return, and especially in this age which is not only the age of science but which, with every passing year, becomes even more scientific.

NOTES:

¹"Every man's work, whether it be literature or music or pictures or architecture or anything else, is always a portrait of himself, and the more he tries to conceal himself, the more clearly will his character appear in spite of him." Quoted from the Signet edition, New York, New American Library, 1960, p. 60.

²S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, tr. D. F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 44.

³See Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 3, 12 in Everyman's Library edition, p. 22.

⁴I.F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (1988; New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 186.

⁵Even Plato, Stone remarks, does not take seriously Socrates' mysticism in which death appears as a "doorway to unblurred vision" (*ibid.*, p. 196).

⁶K.R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), vol. 1, p. 185.

⁷Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 7, 4 in Everyman's Library edition, p. 147.

⁸Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1, p. 190.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁰*Phaedo*, XLV. This and the subsequent quotations are from the translation by F.J. Church, in the Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951), p. 48.

- ¹¹R. Guardini, *The Death of Socrates*, tr. B. Wrighton (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1948), p. 142.
- ¹²*Phaedo*, XLVI.
- ¹³*Ibid.*, XLVII.
- ¹⁴Guardini, *The Death of Socrates*, p. 148.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 149.
- ¹⁶*Phaedo*, XLVI.
- ¹⁷For details, see ch. 8 “The Illusions of Idealism,” in my Gifford Lectures, *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
- ¹⁸*Phaedo*, XLVII.
- ¹⁹*Ibid.*, LVII.
- ²⁰For details, see ch. 1 in my *The Relevance of Physics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
- ²¹*On the Heavens*, 273b.
- ²²See ch. 10 in my *Uneasy Genius: The Life and Work of Pierre Duhem* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984).
- ²³For further discussion, see my *The Savior of Science* (Washington: Regnery-Gateway, 1988).