

A Note On The Charges Against Socrates: Corrupting The Youth, & Making The Weaker Case Seem The Stronger

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1 On the one hand is Plato, who trusted nothing that could not be justified, rationalized, explained, proven, reduced to first principles; on the other hand is Socrates, with his “acoustic hallucination”,¹ who claimed to know nothing.

We should not take it as a lamentable lack that we do not have the master’s actual words but only his disciple’s impersonations; on the contrary, this is one of the best clues to the character of Socrates himself. A writer—e.g., Plato—is a re-writer, a polisher, a tinkerer, he wants everything perfect, he mulls everything over. But that was not Socrates. Philosophy for him was first and foremost public, carried on in front of an audience of boys in the Agora. Second, socratic philosophy was process, not result. It was a kind of combat or *agon*. Socrates was a masterly speaker, a debater, a participator, not a commentator; he could think on his feet, he had an acute perception of the psychology of persuasion and a keen sense of when an opponent was out of his depth. He loved the risk and thrill of putting his reputation at stake in a match of wits. “It is left to the loser to prove that he is not an idiot.”² In short, Socrates had a glut of self-confidence. Plato lacked this—he scurried away and, in solitude, rewrote every dialog, in someone else’s voice, to produce a pre-ordained result.³

2 Socrates invents a new kind of riddle, a linguistic trick: he asks for the meaning of a word which has no object. “Beauty ...”, “Virtue...”, “Justice ... what is it?” Everyone at first gives examples of beautiful things, virtuous people, just acts, and so on, but Socrates demands beauty itself, justice itself, not something which happens, among its many attributes, to be just or beautiful as well. He asks not what a good knife is, or a good person, but what The Good is independently of anything which is good. Even the most respected and intelligent people are baffled. Everyone has a good laugh at this.

But someone, overawed by the technique of it, fails to understand it as a joke—he takes everything seriously: the birth of dialectics Later, he who didn’t get the joke devises a No-Where-Land of hypostasized properties now conceived of as super-objects.

3 Socrates’s constant haranguing of the aristocrats about the craft [*techne*] of governing, and his presumption that if they could not say in what it consisted then they must be bad at it, must have been particularly galling. Aristocrats do not have crafts, like servants and laborers. It must also have been seductively amusing to their adolescent sons to watch Socrates reduce them to frustrated incoherence.⁴

You don’t know the truth until you know why the false is false; without the process of criticism, true belief is mere superstition. This was the innovation which Socrates introduced into Athenian culture.

4 The Athenians’ greatest aspiration—to empire—had been dashed in the Peloponnesian war. Thirty years of war had completely exhausted the Athenians’ resources and culminated in spectacular mismanagement, indecisiveness, and convulsive changes of government from democracy to

tyranny and back. Under such conditions, some serious doubt and self-examination were in order. E.g., the rise of Socrates, the great debunker.

Under such conditions, the strictest husbanding of the few remaining resources was in order, and therefore the strictest hygiene with regard to disruptive influences. I.e., the removal of Socrates.⁵

In 411 BC, during the Peloponnesian war, a group of aristocratic Athenians, among them Alcibiades and some other students of Socrates, overthrew the Athenian democracy. Alcibiades' role in this was apparently to secure Persian support which, in the event, he failed to deliver. This oligarchy lasted only a few months, but jolted the city. In 404 BC, a second coup overthrew the by-then restored Athenian democracy again. Among its leaders were Critias and Charmides, who will be familiar to readers of Plato's dialogs as familiars of Socrates and supporters of Sparta. The oligarchs conducted a year-long reign of terror before democracy was again restored. In 401 BC the oligarchs attempted a third coup, but were thwarted. Socrates was put on trial two years later.

5 One of the charges against Socrates was that he made the weaker case seem the stronger. Why should it have mattered that the weaker case was made to seem the stronger? Why should this have been a serious charge in a court of law, to be tried before the Athenian Assembly? Not as a matter of 'pure reason', not because Socrates had subverted the Truth, but rather as a matter of politics, because of the way Athens was governed.

More and more smart young men were being tutored by Sophists and Rhetors and then making speeches in the Assembly, and to make the weaker case seem the stronger, by means of rhetorical (or sophistical) techniques of argumentation, was liable to lead the Athenians to make a disastrous decision. Since the Assembly had been persuaded to launch the disastrous invasion of Syracuse, it was not merely a question of 'pure reason' or academic freedom to have at one's disposal a technique to argue a case, any case, with a new and powerful intellectual device; it was to have an unfair and dangerous advantage in politics at the highest level. A backlash set in and a scapegoat was sought.

Socrates may have been singled out for several reasons: he was highly visible at Athens. He was resident at Athens (unlike many travelling Sophists and Rhetors who merely passed through). He was critical of those in power at the time. He was known to have been the tutor of Alcibiades (who had originally commanded the failed invasion of Syracuse and whom many suspected of treachery). He was known to have been familiar with Meno; the Meno of Plato's dialog on virtues, the Meno who lead an Athenian expedition to Persia, betrayed Athens and curried favor with the Persian king [Xenophon later rescued the stranded Athenian army; Anytus, one of Socrates accusers at the trial, was present at the aforementioned dialogue on virtue]. Socrates was known to have been familiar with people suspected of treachery and/or of loyalty to Athens' enemies, especially Persia and Sparta [see remark #4 above].

6 Plato, in the *Symposium*, argues that "love wants to create beauty". What a simply bizarre claim! What love wants is: to be required, to be loved in return.

"Love wants to possess the beloved" Plato rightly rejects—but for the wrong reason. Plato's argument against "love wants to possess the beloved" is that one does not want what one already possesses, but only what one does not yet possess. That is rubbish—of course one can still want what one possesses, for that is what makes possession nice. The reason why "love wants to possess the beloved" is wrong is that possessing the beloved is not to have one's love required.

Within the Greek institution of pederasty, it was assumed that a man's lust for a boy would not be required. Good manners expected the man to make advances and the boy to accept them only after a delay and a present; good manners expected the boy to submit to the sexual encounter but not to enjoy it, and not to submit to any penetration. Decency was outraged if a boy made advances to a man, or if a boy enjoyed the sex or let himself be penetrated. In short, platonic love was

assumed to be unrequitable. That is a partial explanation why Plato gives the bizarre answer he does—or, at any rate, why he does not give the obvious answer. He does not give the obvious answer because it was indecent.

7 Plato's *Symposium* is a bizarre work, and I do not mean because it extols the philosophical virtues of a cultural attitude towards pederasty quite different to our own.

In the concluding section of the dialog—after the other speeches, praising pederasty and so on, and after having expounded his own view of platonic love—Plato brings on Alcibiades, the most desirable boy in Athens. Alcibiades comes onto the scene, drunk, and pointedly denies what must have been a widespread rumor, namely that he and Socrates had been lovers. Plato puts a bizarre argument into Socrates's mouth via Alcibiades. I have never liked this argument; it seems contrary to the notion of platonic love Plato had expounded in the previous section (the speech of the woman who tutored Socrates in love), and contrary to the tradition of pederasty (as represented by the speech of Pausanias) within which, and only within which, the *Symposium* makes any sense.

Alcibiades claims to have attempted to show his gratitude to Socrates (presumably for instruction in philosophy) by offering to have sex with him. To Alcibiades's astonishment, the old man rebuffed him—the handsomest youth in all Athens. It is impossible now to know whether such an offer was in fact made and rebuffed; the point is, Plato thought it important to *say* so publicly in his dialog, and he put a bizarre argument into Socrates's mouth explaining why he had rebuffed Alcibiades.

Socrates's argument was that he would be the loser in an unfair exchange of wisdom for mere physical beauty.

According to Athenian practice at the time, and also according to Plato's concept of the ideal form of love between a man and a boy, it was assumed that the beloved boy gave only what he was able to give (the bloom of his beauty), not something equivalent in value to what he had received from his mentor. No one was counted a loser in this unequal exchange, in this non-reciprocal relationship. So why does Socrates refuse Alcibiades's sexual advances?

The passage in the *Symposium* [219A] in which a fictitious conversation is related between Socrates and Alcibiades, in which this inequality figures as a bar to the exchange, runs: "You seem to me to want more than your proper share—gold in exchange for bronze," Socrates is made to say. It was assumed that the boy would get the golden wisdom of his master—that was precisely why younger men were attracted to older men (in ancient Athens, anyway)—, and that the older lover would get the fleeting bloom of the boy's beauty, and that fairness simply didn't enter into the equation of who got what. Why does Plato here insist on fairness? on equal shares? Why does Plato put such a silly argument into Socrates's mouth? Or rather, why does he attribute it to Socrates via Alcibiades?

A truly wise man would not begrudge sharing his wisdom for nothing, for he does not lose it himself thereby. A truly wise man would rejoice in his beloved's becoming wise, and ought to respect a token of the beloved's love and gratitude. So why does Socrates reject Alcibiades? Or rather, why does Plato put that ridiculous argument into Socrates's mouth?

It was not a question of exchanging unequal shares, of gold for brass, as Plato argues. It was rather that it offended decency for a younger man to proposition an older one, however much they desired each other, though it was not indecent for an older man to proposition a younger one (this, on the contrary, was accepted practice). Plato's intention was to spread the story about, after the fact, that Socrates and Alcibiades had not had sex together, and especially that Socrates had refused an indecent offer, in order to clear the reputation of his master. For one of the serious charges against Socrates was that he had "corrupted"—*diaphtherio*'ed—the youth. And the youth in question was undoubtedly the adorable rogue, Alcibiades.

To corrupt an Athenian youth did not consist in having sex with him, but in rendering him

unfit for public office, for example by prostituting him. It was thought that if an Athenian boy would sell his body for sex, he might sell his city-state to a tyrant (or to Sparta or to the Persian king); however, to prostitute a non-Athenian boy was not an offense, for non-Athenians were not allowed to hold public office anyway [see Kenneth Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*]. Public office included, for example, generalship—e.g., leading an expeditionary force to Syracuse.

Alcibiades had (allegedly) betrayed the Athenian cause in the Peloponnesian War by defecting to the Spartans. He was also implicated in one of the coups by the oligarchs. It was well-known that Socrates had been Alcibiades's mentor; if we assume that there were rumors that they had also been lovers, then the seemingly bizarre argument of the *Symposium* makes sense. The Athenians could not try Alcibiades (then living in exile—though they later contrived to murder him), so they tried the nearest one they could lay their hands on: the man who had, allegedly, “corrupted” him. And Plato, years later, wished to clear his master's name of the charge. That is why Plato makes Socrates refuse Alcibiades's indecent offer to sleep with him.

In other words, Plato's *Symposium* is ultimately political philosophy.

Notes

1 Nietzsche, *Will To Power*, §432.

2 Nietzsche, *ibid.*, §431.

3 It is instructive to compare the accounts of Socrates and Plato in Diogenes Laertius's *Lives*, not for their philosophical doctrines, but for clues as to their personal characters. In Book III, on Plato, line 5, we read that “Plato had a weak voice...”, and on line 17 that “Plato was the first to bring to Athens the mimes of Sophron” and allegedly slept with them under his pillow. Plato paid a high price for a book by Pythagoras; Plato loved books, and shunned public speaking. Whereas in Book II, on Socrates, on line 19 we read that “He was formidable in public speaking”; so formidable that the Thirty Tyrants forbade him to teach public speaking.

4 “To tell the young that, in order to gain the full freedom of manhood, they must question every received maximum of conduct and aim at judging every moral question for themselves, is to demoralize them in the sense of cutting away every moral prop and buttress with which parents and society have so studiously environed their childhood. Socrates was, in fact, undermining the morality of social constraint—the morality of obedience to authority and of conformity to custom...” F.M. Cornford, *Before And After Socrates*, Cambridge University Press, 1950, page 48.

5 Nietzsche, *Twilight*, The Problem of Socrates, §8-10.

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