

## Remote Learning Module for 6 April 2020

Lecture Notes for Fernando Espinoza's *The Nature of Science*, Chapter 3

### — Socrates —

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Last time we met the Pluralists, whose interests were directed towards understanding the natural world, especially the forces that bring about events, from the birth and death of living things to the nature and movement of the stars and planets. And we encountered the teachers and rhetoricians known as the Sophists, who prospered during the Golden Age of Athens, and whose doctrine of *epistemic relativism* met with formidable critical resistance from Socrates, who, although he left us no writings of his own, so inspired the pen of Plato that it is no hyperbole to say that Socrates shaped the course of Western philosophy from his own day right down to our own.

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**(1) Athens.** Before we turn directly to the figure of Socrates (469 – 399 BCE), let's first take stock of the cultural context in which he lived and taught. Socrates was a native born Athenian, one of the *hoi poloi* (literally, “the many,” and so, here referring to the many people who occupied the *polis* of Athens). We've been translating this term, *polis*, as “city,” but sometimes it's worth using the hyphenated term, “city-state,” because these Greek *poloi* were autonomous in their governments and ways of life. During Socrates' lifetime, a series of territorial wars erupted between the two great *poloi* of ancient Greece, Athens and Sparta, the last of which ended with a serious defeat of the Athenians by the Spartans—a defeat that ultimately led to the trial and death of Socrates. The government of Athens, you will recall, was a democracy (and for all intents and purposes, the first form of large-scale self-government in history); Sparta, on the other hand, was ruled by a military dictatorship. There were, of course, many other *poloi* in the ancient Greek world; most of these were governed by factions of oligarchs.

However, regardless of their politics, in all the Greek *poloi*, associations among people was understood as falling within only one of two kinds: public and private. On the one hand, *private* matters were those restricted to individual families and households; the Greeks used the term *oekonomia* for everything connected with building and maintaining a household. Our term, “economic,” comes directly from this Greek word, which was translated by the Romans as *domestica*, from which our words “domestic,” and “domesticity” derive. *Public* matters, on the other hand, were concerned with everything else, which is to say, the ancient Greeks did not distinguish, as we do, between the political and the social—for them, everything you did that wasn't behind the closed doors of your own home and estate was political, a concern of the *polis*. So, for example, going to the theater or buying and selling goods in the marketplace (the *agora* in Greek), was public, and therefore political.

Recall too that when Socrates was born in Athens, the Sophists were enjoying a heyday of influence on both legal argumentation and primary education. In part because of their doctrines, rhetorical techniques, and influence on the young, and in part because of the prosperity and artistic achievements of the Athenians who received their teaching, the Sophists were the first thinkers to shift the center of inquiry from the natural world to the political world—the world of ethics, morality, wealth, and power. While they are often credited with having importantly emphasized the limits of human understanding, after their appearance in the works of Plato, they came to be thought of as a corruptive influence on Athenian society because, having spawned a “cult of expertise” in the fashioning of rational argument, they (a) eroded the free use of reason by citizens in the exercise of self-government, and (b) evaporated the religious foundations on which Athenian ethical life hitherto depended.

**(2) Young Socrates.** From what Plato tells us, during his childhood and adolescence, Socrates was not much of a public person. But, having been accepted into the citizenry upon his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, and then taking his two (compulsory) years of military training in the Athenian militia, he entered public life as a dutiful and responsible citizen. His father, Sophroniscus, died around this time, which meant that Socrates became his mother, Phaenarete’s, legal guardian. Plato tells us that Phaenarete eventually remarried, had a second son, Patrocles, and then became a midwife (a profession that would inspire one of Socrates’ most enduring metaphors for what it means to philosophize).

As tensions between Sparta and Athens grew, military confrontations ensued—confrontations in which Socrates served as a *hoplite* or heavily armed infantryman. He saw action at the siege of Potidaea in 432 BCE, and during a battle near Spartolus, at which the Athenians suffered heavy losses, he distinguished himself for bravery (famously by saving the life and armor of the wounded General, Alcibiades, who would later, in 414 BCE, defect to the Spartans). A year later, the first Peloponnesian War (outright hostilities between Athens and Sparta) commenced. Socrates was at the battle of Delium in 424 BCE, and again, a year later, at Amphipolis; both of these battles were disasters for the Athenian army. In 421 BCE, the commander of Athenian forces, Nicias, managed a truce-treaty with Sparta; it didn’t have lasting effect, but with the advent of peace, Socrates returned to Athens, where he found he had a public reputation, for both bravery and incisive, if abstruse, intelligence. He became further known for spending long hours in the Athenian *agora* (the marketplace) engaging anyone and everyone (freemen, women, slaves, the young and the old) in conversational inquiry. At the age of 48, we find him fully embarked on his mission in philosophy, which, on Plato’s testimony, Socrates modeled after his mother’s profession, midwifery (*maieusis* in Greek), because he claimed to be barren of knowledge himself, but to be able to deliver healthy babies should anyone come to him for inquisitive assistance.

Like most of his contemporary citizens, he was well acquainted with the works of Homer, the early Greek poets, and the later dramatists. He took a keen interest in the philosophies of the *physikoi*, the natural philosophers, but with more and more questions of ethics and politics on his mind as Athens grew in prominence on the Greek mainland, he grew disenchanted with the pursuit of natural philosophy all together.

So, he turned his attention to the teachings of various Sophists. These too he found wanting, because, while they professed to be skilled in the art of argument and the teaching of virtue, they seemed to Socrates to be entirely without any knowledge, any understanding, of *why* some arguments are better than others, and *why* some actions are more virtuous, more morally praiseworthy, than others.

### **(3) The Oracle at Delphi.**

From Plato we have the story of how Socrates came to think of his philosophical investigations as a form of *maieutic* reasoning (thinking like a midwife). In this story, one of Socrates' friends, Chaerephon, went to ask a prophecy of the oracle at Delphi (beneath Mt. Olympus and site of an oracular sisterhood who were thought to have the gift of omniscient prophecy). Chaerephon's question to the priestess there was: Is there anyone in the city of Athens wiser than Socrates; the oracle is said to have replied that there was not. This was puzzling to Socrates, since he was convinced that he knew very little, if anything much at all. Eventually, he solved the riddle: the oracle was right; he *was* the wisest man in Athens—because among all the Athenians, including the Sophists, he alone knew that he knew nothing. His questioning thereafter always began with a simple plea for definition, in the form of the Greek, *Ti estin ...* (“What is ... ?). If a soldier would proclaim that so-and-so was brave, Socrates would ask: “Can you tell me first: What is courage?” If a Sophist claimed to be a successful teacher of virtue, Socrates would ask: “But can you tell me first: What is virtue?” For many Athenians, these questions were irritating. Socrates would later refer to himself as the “gadfly” of Athens, whose intent was to stimulate his fellow citizens from complacency in thought and deed.

### **(4) Trial and Death.**

Hostilities broke out again between Athens and Sparta, and in 404 – 403 BCE the last of the Peloponnesian wars ended with a resounding defeat of the Athenian forces by the Spartans. After the siege of Athens, the citizens expected to be massacred, but instead, the Spartans demanded only that Athens abandon its democratic system of government (majority voice in the Assembly) and place the reins of power in an elected government, known as The Thirty (one of whose members, Critias, you may remember from our discussion of the Sophists last week). With only a small garrison left to monitor the city, the Spartans returned home. The Thirty imposed a strict reign. In the course of consolidating their power, they confiscated the property of wealthy Athenians and foreigners alike, many of whom they executed. Blood ran in the streets. Before long, a pro-democratic contingent emerged, and initiated a rebellion that eventually led to the demise of The Thirty, and a return to some semblance of democracy.

The Athenians were, naturally, as you might expect, devastated by the crushing defeat they endured at the hands of the Spartans and the Tyranny of The Thirty. In the course of seeking revenge on the oppressors from among their own ranks, they came to bring Socrates to trial in the spring of 399 BCE, after an indictment proffered by Meletus, who accused Socrates of impiety before the gods of Athens and for corrupting the youth by way of this impiety—steering them away from traditional religion by his constant questioning. In the course of this trial, Socrates defended himself vigorously. A legal defense in Greek is called an *apologia*. The story

of Socrates' "Apology"—his defense against the charges of impiety and corrupting the youth is told in Plato's dialogue of the same name. Unlike most of the other dialogues, which probably owe more to invention than reporting, we can be reasonably sure of what Socrates said on that fateful day in 399 BCE, because we have independent testimony from the general, Xenophon. In the course of his defense, Socrates insisted that he had always been and remained a faithful citizen of the city, without disregard for its gods. And in considering the charge of corrupting the youth, he drew a distinction between his philosophical practices (on analogy to midwifery) and the teachings of the Sophists. Whereas the Sophists made their livings by selling "unknown goods for the soul" (claiming to teach virtue without any inkling of what virtue actually is), he, on the other hand, was simply engaged in the disinterested pursuit of the truth. Although Socrates had many supporters in the Assembly that day, the majority rejected his counterarguments, and he was condemned to death by poisoning (the customary manner of execution of citizens).

From Plato we hear that shortly before the day set for his execution, Socrates's childhood friend, Crito, implored Socrates to escape into exile. Socrates is said to have replied that "Neither to do wrong or to return a wrong is ever right, not even to injure in return for an injury received, even under threat of death." Furthermore, he told Crito, were he to exile himself unlawfully (after his trial and sentencing), when he could have earlier done so lawfully (before the trial even began, as was his right as a citizen), he would in fact confirm the jury's judgment that he was a corrupter of the young, and thereby cast a terrible shadow of shame on his friends and family.

Accordingly, on the appointed day in the summer of 399 BCE, he accepted and drank the hemlock provided by the executioner, surrounded by his disciples, whom he enjoined not to weep, for though his body might soon suffer death, his soul would remain immortal. Among his several arguments for this astounding claim (remember that for the Greeks, the only essential difference between the gods and human beings was immortality), we find this: being capable of intellectual knowledge that could never have been furnished by his bodily senses, some part of himself, his soul, must be incorporeal (not bodily), and therefore incorruptible (deathless).

Brooding over the death of his beloved teacher, Plato would celebrate the life and thought of Socrates in a series of dialogues intended to represent the many conversations Socrates had throughout the course of his life in pursuit of knowledge, asking of all comers: "But can you tell me first: What is it?" In nearly all of these dialogues, Plato presents Socrates as a tragic figure, caught between skepticism and tyranny.

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Next time, we'll turn our attention to Socrates' disciple and biographer, Plato, whose influence on the subsequent history of philosophy was enormous. The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, went so far as to claim that the entire history of Western thought consists in nothing more than a series of footnotes to Plato! Be well everyone, and remember: social distancing continues to save lives, which is presumably why we are still not in JUB 202 presently. I hope you and yours are all in good health as we make our way through these difficult times. It will not be easy, but we will make it through—with courage, dignity, and grace. Let us then ask: What is courage? What is dignity? What is grace?