1 Socrates and "another side of the truth": Subjectivity and Felt Conviction

> *And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and He cried, "Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." God said: "Do not come near! Remove thy sandals from thy feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." Moses hid his face; as he was afraid to look upon God.*
>
> – Exodus 3:4–6

> *Isaiah answer'd: "I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception: but my senses discovered the infinite in every thing, and as I was then perswaded [sic], & I remain confirm'd, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God. I cared not for consequences, but wrote." Then I asked: "Does a firm perswasion that a thing is so, make it so?" He replied: "All poets believe that it does, & in ages of imagination this firm perswasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm perswasion of any thing."*
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> *Improvement makes for strait [sic] roads, but the crooked roads without Improvement are roads of Genius.*
>
> – William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "A Memorable Fancy"

> *Human life is poetry. It's we who live it, unconsciously, day by day, . . . yet in its inviolable wholeness it lives us, it composes us. This is something far different from the old cliché, "Turn your life into a work of art"; we are works of art – but we are not the artist.*
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> – Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Looking Back: Memoirs*

For Kierkegaard, a supremely meaningful life requires having a personal destiny formed in relation to God, and remaining faithful to our greatest loves and passions. Since love and God are not two but one, these twin desiderata tend to merge. Kierkegaard's admiration for the spirit of classical Greek philosophy, and particularly for Socrates, cannot be overstated.

Near the very end of his life, Kierkegaard writes that "the only analogy I have before me is Socrates" (KW 23, 341). Socrates was his intellectual hero, so he provides an obvious starting point for this Element. For, when Camus portrays "the fundamental question of philosophy" as whether, and on what terms, life is worth living,[1] he is reviving a Socratic conception of philosophy (Furtak 2013a).

It is frequently observed that some of the early Greek thinkers, from the pre-Socratics through Aristotle, had interests that included naturalistic metaphysics. A contemporary bias in favor of all things scientific can entail an overemphasis on this, and a voluntary ignoring of other overlaps – between, for instance,

[1] Camus (1991, 3–4).

ancient philosophy and poetry, or ancient philosophy and religion. Numerous classical Greek thinkers wrote poetically, Plato included, and very few were atheists. Narrow, modish assumptions about rationality, and about philosophy itself, "persistently distort and misrepresent" the ancient Greek world.[2] It is accurate enough to state that ancient Greek philosophers were dedicated to reason, as long as we keep in mind that their "conception of 'reason' was richer and more complex than our own" (Nightingale 2021, 171).

Here are two examples suggesting that to question traditional views, for the early Greek thinkers, does not require elevating scientific evidence over the literary and the religious as such. The itinerant poet-philosopher Xenophanes, originally of Colophon, is well-known as a critic of deities made in human form: "If cattle or horses or lions had hands and could draw / And could sculpture like men, then the horses would draw their gods / Like horses, and cattle like cattle, and each would then shape / Bodies of gods in the likeness, each kind, of its own."[3] Yet this critique of anthromorphic gods and goddesses such as those found in Homer's polytheistic vision and in the popular imagination serves the purpose of a heterodox theism: there is, Xenophanes asserts, "One God, greatest among gods and human beings, / In no way similar to mortals either in body or in thought."[4] And the poet Sappho of Lesbos, roughly a contemporary of the consensus "first philosopher" Thales, already takes a stand against the frequently war-glorifying Homeric epics when she writes, "Some say an army on horseback, / some say on foot, and some say ships / are the most beautiful things / on this black earth, / but I say / it is whatever you love."[5] She offers an alternate theory of value and anticipates the discussions of love in Plato's *Symposium*.

At a loss to characterize what defines the family resemblance among modern existential philosophers, Walter Kaufmann at one point refers to "their perfervid individualism."[6] This is more of an apt description than it might initially seem to be, and it captures what distinguishes the emergence of early Greek philosophy as well. The ancient philosophers' avid quest to think for themselves allows them to show us the possibilities that we might embrace, for they are never simply a mirror of their context. They offer us alternatives to the most prevalent

[2] Kingsley (1995, 372–373).
[3] Fragment 15 (Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, 168–169), trans. by Karl Popper, cited in Magee (2001, 16).
[4] Fragment 23 (Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, 169–170), modified translation. See also Fragments 24–26. Cf. Stephen R. L. Clark (1997).
[5] Poem 31, translated by Stanley Lombardo. On this fragment, see Zellner (2007). See also Elkins (2020).
[6] Kaufmann (1975, 11).

vantage points, rescuing us from being intellectually a mere reflex of where and when we happened to be born. They both disprove and liberate us from "the insipid tenet that every thought is the product of its time," inviting us to bear the weight of questions that are always new for each of us,[7] for which there is no answer in the back of the book. And they may help us to discover an interpretation of existence that relates to our deepest perplexities and our highest aspirations.

A criterion of individuality in philosophical vision serves well to distinguish the first Greek philosophers from what came before. For a philosophy could be defined as a framework through which we make sense of the world and our place in it, whether implicitly by virtue of our upbringing or more deliberately through critical evaluation. Many ancient Greeks took for granted the Homeric view of things, which no doubt qualifies as a worldview,[8] and as we shall see, it operates in the background of subsequent philosophizing – not least in Plato's dialogues, which selectively integrate and transform it for their own purposes.[9] Critical evaluation of a given framework is crucial: one is not a philosopher just by virtue of holding opinions, even if the unreflective adherent of the Homeric worldview does in a sense *have* a philosophy.

This is not to say that theoretical inquiry, the questioning and modification of inherited ideas, is more important than upholding an existential attitude: theory without practice is just as bad as practice without a consciously formulated theoretical outlook. Both are essential to the ancient Greeks. Implicitly following Stoic precepts because, say, one grew up male in a macho culture differs from formulating *and* following Stoic doctrine – as Chrysippus did – or critically revising that doctrine and striving to enact one's revised version of Stoic ethics – as Aristo of Chios and Dionysius of Heraclea, for instance, are said to have done.[10]

So we should ask ourselves, even when encountering the more apparently naturalistic arguments found in some pre-Socratic thinkers, what pertinence

[7] Sloterdijk (2013, 66). To embrace the insipid tenet, he adds, offers us an easy way to escape the burden of perennial philosophy. Another contemporary author phrases it this way: "It's naïve to think that philosophy can be practiced, and preserved, without some degree of economic and political stability and support. Yet it's cynical to think that philosophy is never anything more than an expression of political and economic power" – Adamson (2014, xii).

[8] See Irwin (1989, 6–17); Harold (2004, 1).

[9] One could argue that Christianity would do the same with aspects of classical Greek thought. Does this make everyone engaged in Christian practice into a philosopher? For an affirmative answer, see Hadot (2002, 237–252). Cf. Hadot (1995, 272): "In ancient philosophy, it was not only Chrysippus or Epicurus who [as theorists] were considered philosophers. Rather, every person who lived according to the precepts of Chrysippus or Epicurus was every bit as much of a philosopher as they." I think this goes a little too far. On Hadot's tendency to elevate practice *over* theory, see Aubry (2013).

[10] On Aristo and Dionysius, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.160–164, 7.166–167.

does this idea have for human beings who seek to understand reality and their role in it? The pursuit of wisdom that relates to human life is such a prominent theme throughout this period that our principle of interpretation ought to be that all theorizing relates to practice, unless there are compelling reasons to conclude otherwise in a concrete instance.[11] This means that we cannot approach the ancient Greeks with the prevalent modern conception of philosophy in mind, which presumes that abstract reflections and theoretical positions are entities that interact in logical space, having a life of their own at a remove from human existence. Instead, we must take seriously the Greek sense that inquiry into the structure of the universe and of the human mind is needed in order to comport oneself well. For an analytic philosopher with a dry wit, it is easy to make fun of a figure such as Thales for claiming that everything is water (and that souls are present in all things). "Presocratic inquiries were inevitably crude. Thales, if we are to believe the later testimony, held that everything is made of water," such that "cucumbers are 100 per cent water, not 99 per cent as modern culinary pundits say." As is all the sand in the Sahara Desert (Barnes 1987, 21).

By contrast, here is a vastly more imaginative classicist, namely Nietzsche:

> Greek philosophy seems to begin with an absurd notion, with the proposition that *water* is the primal origin and the womb of all things. Is it really necessary to take serious notice of this proposition? It is. . . . because contained in it, if only embryonically, is the thought, "all things are one." (Nietzsche 1962, 38–39).

Or take the notion that a cosmic principle of reason is echoed in the human mind, first articulated by Heraclitus. If one believes this, then the best life one can lead will be based upon abiding by that principle of reason. This illustrates how it could be that philosophical reflection can lead to insight about existence and its meaning, thus issuing in an exemplary way of living. Whatever may be said on behalf of philosophy as a merely academic enterprise, there are core questions of philosophy as it has existed in the Western tradition – most of them, of course, first examined by the ancient Greeks – that are not legitimately pursued in a manner that fails to take account of the individual to whom these questions pertain, and whose being is at stake in how she or he answers them. So there may be little to be said in favor of a nonexistential ideal of what philosophy ought to be.

We ought to reject the naysayers who assert, generally without argument, that the "view of philosophy as concerned with the philosophy of life" is in fact "rather narrow" (!) and too "romantic" besides (Hamlyn 1990, 13). What it is, in fact, is ambitious, inclusive, and ancient. It may be fair enough to claim, as

[11] Cf. Hadot (2002, 5–6).

another analytically minded contemporary philosopher does (see Cooper 2012, 25), that "you could not make a life from thinking what Anaximander or Anaximenes did about the origins and current composition of the natural world," but he might have gone a bit out of his way to notice what Heidegger writes about the former (in Heidegger 2015, 1–77).

If we were to trace the existential spirit through philosophy's early flowering in ancient Greece and the broader Mediterranean world from Thales (and Sappho) to Pyrrho, we would find that it is pervasive during these centuries – yet more emphatically so at certain places and times. It is accurate to suggest that, just as it is centered geographically in Athens during its heyday, the existential spirit builds up to a pinnacle in the middle dialogues of Plato, above all in the figure of Socrates as he is presented in the *Phaedo*, discoursing about the psyche on the last day of his life. Nowhere else is intense theoretical reflection linked to such an urgent issue that concerns each of us in particular. Death is the only certainty, and the only thing about which nothing is more uncertain, as Kierkegaard points out, writing that "inasmuch as death is the object of earnestness," a sincere inquiry into it requires "that we should not be overhasty in acquiring an opinion with regard to it" (KW 15, 99–100). It must not be a *mere* opinion to which we pay lip-service, because "not only is that person mad who talks senselessly, but the person is fully as mad who states a correct opinion if it has absolutely no significance for him" (KW 15, 99–100). In Kierkegaard's pseudonymous *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, this theme is much stressed.

According to Plato's *Apology*, Socrates – on trial for impiety and corruption – claimed that "the unexamined life is not worth living" for a human being,[12] and that he had a special vocation to provoke his fellow citizens into leading the examined life. Plato goes out of his way to indicate that he himself was present at the trial (34a, 38b), an uncharacteristic move that is not duplicated anywhere else in his writings. That would appear to suggest that we are getting something like an eyewitness account of what the historical Socrates said on this occasion.[13] That Kierkegaard supports this interpretation is shown, e.g., when he writes that "Socrates would not use the speech which was offered him," finding it too "artfully contrived."[14] In addition, the character of Socrates in the *Apology* is a literary figure who bears a strong resemblance to the historical philosopher.

[12] *Apology* 38a. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the G. M. A. Grube translation of this dialogue (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981).

[13] Cf. Brickhouse and Smith (1989, 2–4). The judicious conclusion that this text is a reconstruction of the speech that Socrates actually gave is reached by Hadot (2002, 24). See also Cornford (1932, 35).

[14] Kierkegaard, *Pap* X 4 A 314 / JP 4283. Undated entry from 1851.

And Socrates must have been up to something, because his friend Chaerephon went to the Delphic oracle of Apollo and asked if anyone was wiser than Socrates. Perhaps it had to do with the widespread opinion "that in certain respects Socrates is superior to the majority" (34e–35a). The answer he received was that "no one was wiser" (21a). This prompted Socrates to search for others who seemed to possess wisdom – including politicians, poets, and craftsmen – in order to show the oracle a counterexample (21b–23b). Was he trying to refute the oracle? The overall tone of Socrates in this dialogue is that of a religiously devout person, so it seems more likely that he was seeking only to clarify, through an *apparent* counterexample, what exactly the oracle meant. Singling out the poets especially, Kierkegaard writes that poetry "present[s] things in the medium of the imagination instead of urging people toward ethical realization" (*Pap* X 2 A 229; NB14:55 / KJN 6, 381). Socrates, by contrast, "managed to keep himself on the pinnacle of continually expressing the existential,"[15] as the Danish existential thinker points out.

We get a glimpse of the Socratic method of questioning when Socrates cross-examines his accuser Meletus (24d–27e), leading him to contradict himself and to show that he does not really care about the issues of impiety and corruption. What is the pertinence of the latter point? If Socrates is guilty as charged, then it would seem to be irrelevant whether the plaintiff cares authentically about the matters at hand. Yet a central premise of the Socratic method is that the person being examined be truly invested in the views that he or she espouses, and not merely to be entertaining a position. His emphasis on the difference between theory abstractly conceived and actual personal conviction shows the existential spirit of Socratic philosophizing.

Philosophy for Socrates, then, is "a process, a discipline, a lifelong quest,"[16] based upon subjecting one's ideas to rational criticism in dialogue with others, refuting apparent knowledge in order to bring people to admit their ignorance and interrogate things more critically. Some of his interlocutors might find this edifying, but many others, such as Meletus, are only annoyed and angry to be roped into a conversation guided by Socrates and *his* agenda. How can Socrates defend the value of his practice? For one thing, he regards himself as divinely authorized to do what he has been doing, thanks in part to the oracle, even if he is a prophet with no message to proclaim – this is why Kierkegaard calls him "purely negative" (CI, 210). It is a magnificent refutation of the charge of impiety if he can convince the jury that he indeed has a sacrosanct vocation to engage in philosophical questioning: "the god ordered me," he says, to lead "the

[15] From the same 1849 notebook entry just quoted.
[16] Tarnas (1991, 34–35); see also Ricken (1991, 54).