

By way of an Introduction: These pages contain individual chapters from my 1990 book, Postmodern Sophistications. I have obtained the rights to the essays am making them available separately. The entire text of the book is also available on Research Gate.

The underlying aim of this collection of essays was to question the opposition between the Sophists and Plato. That classic dispute has been the model for many discussions of tensions within our society:: on the one hand you have the clever manipulative salesmen who care nothing about truth. On the other hand the rigorous scientific investigation that never quite makes contact with politics. Rootless nihilism vs. naturally grounded values. Anarchy vs. Rules.

These essays developed a pragmatic middleground, using ideas from Heidegger and Dewey; in later writings I rely more on Hegel. But the point remains the same: don't listen to the Straussians and others who try to force our thinking (or our politics or art or philosophy) into a blunt opposition between truth-loving traditionalists (Socrates) and flaky relativistic postmoderns (the Sophists). It was not so simple in Greece and it's not so simple today.

Part of the book deals with postmodern critiques of rational knowledge, with Lyotard and Habermas on center stage. Their opposition remains relevant, although post-1990 developments in deconstruction and critical theory have widened and deepened the debate. The points made in these essays remain useful, if not complete.

The second part of the book deals with architecture, where modern and postmodern staged a public standoff. The word postmodern has now gone out of fashion in architecture. But the earlier use of the term still applies to the attempt to weave historical references back into architectural practices that had been taught to seek formal purity. .

I stand by my diagnosis of postmodern architecture as just another modern distance from history, and my argument that that modern architecture's proclaimed distance from history was itself an illusion. We are more embedded in history than the moderns wanted to think, although that embodiment is not as total and restrictive as they imagined for our ancestors.

If you find any of these ideas useful, true, provocative, let me know. If you find them absurd or useless airy nothings, I'd still be delighted to learn

from your reactions.

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This first chapter sets the stage by discussing the ambivalent role of Socrates.

Socrates and the Story of Inquiry

We start where it all starts, with Socrates and Plato. It had started earlier, of course, but Plato, that master rhetorician, persuaded us that the crucial issue was the confrontation between Socrates and the Sophists. In this and the following chapters I hope to blunt the force of that confrontation without giving in to either side.

Socrates made men think about the basis of their beliefs and values; after trying him for corrupting the youth and upsetting the order of life, they condemned him to die. In prison, he talked with his disciples about life after death, then drank the hemlock and was silent. So the story goes. It is historical; we take it literally.

There was indeed a man Socrates, son of Sophroniscos of Athens. He was born around 469 and died in 399 after being condemned during the tumultuous times after the Peloponnesian War. He was married, had children, perhaps worked as a stone-cutter. He was short and ugly but brave and incredibly hardy, a heroic soldier when heroism was demanded. He had aristocratic friends and spent much of his time in conversation in public places or at his friends' homes. He asked questions and talked about virtue, love, and justice. When he was younger he may have studied the new physical theories of the day; when he was older he had little to do with such topics. He did not approve of democratic government. Some of his students went on to become famous philosophers and virtuous men; others became notorious tyrants and traitors. When brought to court he defended himself but refused to engage in easy rhetoric or to accept exile. He died nobly. This Socrates seems an interesting person, but not yet the shining figure that figure exists in the words of Plato.

A more strident, less captivating Socrates exists in the words of Xenophon. Because Socrates existed and really did die for his convictions, his life obtains added cachet, though we are not sure precisely what those convictions were that he died for. But a

quest for the historical Socrates is not enough. It is the story Plato tells that influences us, whether or not it is literally true.

In a letter that is perhaps genuine, Plato is reported to have said, "there is not now and never will be a written work of Plato's; what are now called Plato's are those of a Socrates become young and beautiful." (*Second Letter* 314e). This Socrates fascinates us by his irony and his seriousness, his detachment and his erotic dedication to truth and to his hearers, his ability to weave words and thoughts while eying the goal and judging his own ignorance.

I tell you that to let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining myself and others is really the very best thing that a man can do, and that life without this examination is not worth living. (*Apology* 38a)

To foster this examination of life Socrates questions, argues, goads, teases, laughs, accuses, anything that will move his hearers. Beyond what he says shines the beauty of the quest and the beauty of the good embodied in him.

What Socrates reminds me of is one of those little statues of Silenus you see for sale, an ugly little man holding a flute in his hands, but when you open the figure up there are images of the gods inside. (*Symposium* 215b)

We are attracted to this wise old man who is a playful erotic child. This rich significant Socrates enfolds the historical facts. He presents the figure of the Inquirer, and offers to tell us the story of our lives as a journey from ignorance and confusion in search of ever wider knowledge and ever deeper grounds, until we come into the luminous presence of full reality. Plato's Socrates does argue for particular theories in physics and metaphysics, but his significance transcends his theories. His quest opens the conversation that makes room for such theories.

In pursuing his inquiries Socrates does the things we have come to expect of philosophers. He analyzes concepts, seeks precise definitions and principles, tests methods, attacks views by pointing out inconsistencies and providing counter-examples, and so on. In the game of logos he knows all the moves. But at times he announces that he is leaving the logos and entering the mythos. Then he tells stories. They range from little anecdotes to grand and glorious visions of the fate of the soul.

In the *Phaedo* we hear of the immense earth in one of whose murky hollows we live, while above on the true surface live men who see the stars as they really are. Our souls will be carried about and purified by the great

interior rivers of the world until the time for their rebirth. In the *Phaedrus* we see the great procession of the gods and souls above the world, and the fall of the soul that loses its wings and descends to our confused realm, to find its wings again through love. In the *Republic* we are told of judgment after death, and how souls must choose lots for their next lives. And there are many more stories.

These myths puzzle us. Socrates insists on the need for conceptually clear principles; he attacks Homer and Greek religion for telling lies; he announces that he is continuing an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. Then he tells myths. Why? They have interpreted as persuasive rhetoric substituting for argument, or as metaphysics for the masses, or as mystical intimations.

I will not try to settle this question. The myths have many different functions; I want to single out one without claiming it is the whole. Socrates's myths, especially the larger ones, are placed strategically to influence our present life rather than to give us news about a future life. They tell us how to live here and now by creating plots for our lives.

Now perhaps all this seems to you like an old wife's tale and you despise it, and there would be nothing strange in despising it if our searches could discover anywhere a better and truer account, but as it is you see that you . . . cannot demonstrate that we should live any other life than this, which is plainly of benefit also in the other world.
(*Gorgias* 527a)

Now, Glaucon, the tale was saved, as the saying is, and was not lost. And it will save us, if we believe it. . . . We shall hold ever to the upward way and pursue righteousness with wisdom always and ever.
(*Republic* 621c)

The myths do provide conjectures about a future life that can be taken into account in some calculation of costs and benefits. But there is a more basic influence. The myths give a sweep to the movement of life. They turn moral theories into life plans. They encourage us to emphasize and link together feelings and episodes we may not have noticed or may have considered marginal: feelings of emptiness and insecurity, and a desire for more purity and clarity than the senses can provide.

The stories provide a plot that outlines stages of moral growth. These stages have internal contrasts among themselves, contrasts that may be present in our everyday life even if the otherworldly goal is left aside or taken metaphorically. The description of the stages turns our life into a progress. Our life can become a unified journey when the story gives it a direction.

Plato's moral myths can remain in force even if his literal metaphysics is denied. The

moral progress has its own logic that can survive the denial of the ultimate goal. The myths are not the metaphysics in rhetorical fancy dress. In some ways it is the reverse: the myths ground the metaphysics. Imagine that everything in Plato's metaphysics is true: the Forms, the half-real world of the senses, the afterlife, and so on. Is it self-evident how such a world would be lived? Perhaps it would cause terror, or boredom, or be as remote from everyday experience as quantum mechanics seems to be. We give the metaphysics impact by finding ourselves within stories that weave its structure into stages for our lives. And the metaphysics does not have to be literally true for the internal development of those stories to shape us.

Yet we find Plato's stories strange; they have seldom survived as living forces except where they have been incorporated into Christian stories. Perhaps they could still work on us as can the stories of Achilles or Oedipus. But now as in Plato's time they are only a few among many. For us all those old stories--the hero Heracles, the resourceful Odysseus, the path of duty in Marcus Aurelius, the Christian saint--have been further supplemented by newer stories--the hero of science, the revolutionary, the Nietzschean man of power. We are tolerant of this multiplicity. We are not inclined to demand one exclusive story about the development of our lives, and Plato's myths may give way to other, perhaps richer tales. We do not find this surprising.

Why then are we not surprised by the continuing dominance of the story of Socrates? For this story, too, is a myth. I do not mean that when Socrates argues about the nature of mathematics or the analysis of some ethical concept he is telling a myth. His arguments have to be judged on their own terms according to their subject matter.

When he argues Socrates is not telling a myth, but he is enacting one. Socrates and his interlocutors argue about metaphysics and the good life. Later thinkers argue against Socrates, but in rejecting his conclusions they still play his game. They do not wish to say what he said, but they willingly do what he did. They reject his arguments and the moral path proposed in the myths of the soul, but they have accepted his story of the path of inquiry.

This path stretches from ignorance to total knowledge. We are to take nothing for granted, seeking foundations and basic principles until we come into the presence of the Truth. Values can be founded on contact with the Forms that are the ground for all beings. Plato believed that the world was so structured so as to make such a goal possible.

Later thinkers may deny the Forms, deny that values can be based in metaphysics, restrict knowledge to the physical sciences that Plato considered unworthy of the name "knowledge," and despite these basic changes still describe their own journey of

inquiry in Socratic terms.

It would seem that Plato's intellectual story is even more independent of the rest of his theory than are his moral myths. Socrates embodies a story of our inquiries holding ever to the upward way. The Socratic journey encourages us to emphasize and link together feelings and episodes that we may not have noticed or may have considered marginal: wonder about just what defines things, longing for a solid ground, desire for a knowledge beyond our opinions and our history. In the light of this tale we can see stretches of our thought as having a direction. We can distinguish stages and see progress toward a goal of completely grounded knowing. This creates unity in our intellectual life; it makes into a connected story what might otherwise have been only scattered curiosity. Our cognitive life becomes a whole when the story gives it direction.

The path of inquiry contains internal contrasts among its stages, contrasts that can continue to structure our life when the specifics of Plato's theories are denied, or even when the final goal is declared impossible of realization. Socrates has shown us an intellectual ethics for behaving well on the journey: erotic attraction to the good, communal dialogue, impartial questioning, openness and refusal to insist on one's own opinions. This ethics of the journey and the internal stages of the path take precedence over its end. Whether the journey has an end and what kind it might be become matters to be adjudicated according to the method and ethics of the journey itself. Socrates's story defines a self-critical process that forms its own goals independently of any historical or cultural setting. We will see this again in Habermas, and later I will explore a more situated self-criticism.

The Socratic path gives unity and coherence to our cognitive struggles. It is a specific journey with its own qualities. Apollo at Delphi declared Socrates the wisest of men. After his condemnation Socrates's execution was delayed while Athens sent a ship to Delos to commemorate the victory of Theseus over the Minotaur, the ancient day when the crafty Athenian hero freed men from the need to sacrifice to the half-beast. Socrates's path seeks victory over the beast in us, over our passions and our selfishness. The light at the summit of the path is both moral and cognitive. Socrates brings the goals of spirit: unity, simplicity, transparency, clarity and necessity. Our shifting polysemic soul will become uniform, and the images in the cave will be left behind for clear vision where what exists stays fixed in pure identity and presence. Socrates makes us live the story of the transcendence of all stories into clear vision. Plato's practice may belie this, but such is the tale he tells.

In Plato's eyes there was little choice. The only alternatives were the blind confusion in the old stories or the willful chaos lurking behind the fashionable scepticism of the

Sophists.

Is it strange that after so long we still agree so much with Plato's description of our cognitive situation? While there are many stories of our moral development, the cognitive quest remains much as Socrates defined it. Those who reject Plato's doctrines still tend, when they describe their intellectual life, to journey on Socrates's path. Other cognitive routes have been suggested from time to time, such as sceptical contentment, or paths leading to mysticism or to placing poetry above principles, but these stories have remained without wide influence. Socrates's story gives professional identity to groups; it has become the official self-portrait of philosophy and science. Could a university or a laboratory describe itself without the Socratic story of ever firmer grounds and ever more total vision?

How is it that Socrates has triumphed? Has he really defined the only way minds can inquire, their final relation to the past and to the world?

The times are changing. David Hume preached contentment with ungrounded custom; Nietzsche taught everlasting conflicts of interpretation; Heidegger talked of an inquiry that listens without seeking any overall goal, partial illumination that is not part of a full vision to come. There are semiotic, pragmatic, deconstructive stories, and others from the East.

We are not sure how to judge and evaluate these stories. Or rather we are not sure whether we should judge and evaluate them, since that is an

activity performed on the Socratic way. The new stories have not yet changed our institutional or personal identity as inquirers, but they are present more actively than ever before. Much of the confusion surrounding recent discussions of the "end of philosophy" have to do with uncertainty about what story such discussions should belong to. After affirming that we do not need one overarching story, what does one say next?

The great modern systems of philosophy and science have kept to the Socratic way, while some postmodern thinkers have enlisted under the banner of his enemies, the Sophists. But it is no longer only a choice between Socrates and Sophism. Whether the Socratic myth will be successfully challenged we do not know; what path of inquiry might take its place we cannot tell; that no single story reign supreme we can only begin to imagine. Yet it has never been self-evident that our inquiring must be unified in only one story. Will the day come when we will see as many stories structuring our cognitive curiosity and inquiry as we hear tales of the stages of moral, emotional, and spiritual life? No story tells us what will happen next.

