

Introduction

The Issues of the *Phaedo*

I undertake this study of the *Phaedo* in order to understand the rationalism of Plato's Socrates. It is a striking feature of the contemporary intellectual situation that a study such as this can be of more than simply historical interest. But the question of the character of Socratic rationalism has been made a vital question by those contemporary thinkers, beginning with Nietzsche, who doubt the availability of objectively valid answers to our deepest questions—who doubt, in other words, that reason can guide life. These thinkers point unambiguously to Socratic rationalism as the source of all rationalism in Western philosophy. In Nietzsche's words, it is Socrates whose influence "down to the present time and even into all future time, has spread over posterity like a shadow that keeps growing in the evening sun."¹ Clearly, if we wish to render an independent judgment of the contemporary rejection of rationalism, we must begin with an understanding of Socratic rationalism. A sketch of Nietzsche's charge against Socrates will enable us to see that the *Phaedo* in particular is a crucial piece of evidence in the contemporary trial of Socrates.

According to Nietzsche, it was Plato's Socrates who first expressed the central assertion of Western philosophy, classical as well as modern. This assertion declares that the whole of nature is intelligible or that we live in a cosmos and not a chaos.² Nietzsche refers to this contention as

the profound *illusion* that first saw the light of the world in the person of Socrates: the unshakable faith that thought, using

the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is not only capable of knowing being but even of *correcting* it.³

The famous Ideas—eternal, unchanging, and incorporeal intelligibles overseen by the Idea of the Good—constitute this metaphysically certain teleological order.⁴ Yet, this metaphysical certainty—so the argument goes—was *asserted* rather than proved. The rationalism of Plato's Socrates rests on an arbitrary choice and is therefore, at bottom, irrational.

The evidence for the assertoric character of Socratic doctrine lies especially in the unbridgeable chasm between the intelligible order and the corporeal, contingent world of our experience, the world which was supposed to be explained.⁵ Plato's Socrates merely posits the distinction, in Nietzsche's terms, between "the true world" and "the apparent world," the former characterizing the realm of the intelligible and the latter the world in which we live.⁶ In revealing Plato's dogmatism, Nietzsche exposes Socratic doctrine as a projection of a new world aimed at providing the "metaphysical comfort" of cosmic support for the human good, support that is uncertain in the world of our experience. For Nietzsche, the view of Plato's Socrates dictates a preference for that which is universal, rational, and unchanging over that which is individual, instinctual, and transient. This preference, in Nietzsche's view, amounts finally to an unfounded preference for wisdom over life.⁷ It is a preference that is purportedly revealed most clearly in the words Socrates utters as he dies:

Concerning life, the wisest men of all ages have judged alike: *it is no good*. Always and everywhere one has heard the same sound from their mouths—a sound full of doubt, full of melancholy, full of weariness of life, full of resistance to life. Even Socrates said, as he died, "To live—that means to be sick a long time: I owe Asclepius the Savior a rooster."⁸

It is in the *Phaedo* that we find the portrayal of that day on which Socrates uttered his last words. And, appropriately, it is in this dialogue that Socrates confronts the issue that is central to Nietzsche's judgment of Socrates, the issue of the relation between wisdom and life. For this reason, then, an understanding of the *Phaedo* can assist us in rendering an independent judgment of the contemporary verdict concerning rationalism.

The most conspicuous aspect of the *Phaedo* would seem to substantiate Nietzsche's judgment of Socrates. Pervading the dialogue are those two doctrines, the doctrine of the Ideas and the doctrine of the Immor-

tality of the Soul which, taken together, seem to confirm that Socrates does indeed prefer the “true world” of the eternal intelligibles to the transient “apparent world.” The Ideas are those intelligibles which must be unchanging in order to fulfill the requirements of perfect wisdom. If these objects of knowledge were themselves subject to change, they would stand in need of further explanation with reference to whatever was responsible for their alteration. In order that they be regarded as unchanging, the Ideas must also be thought to be incorporeal, because all that is corporeal is subject to change. Given this unchanging, incorporeal character, the question arises as to how we who are (at least in part) corporeal can communicate with such intelligibles. All that is corporeal impedes the establishment of any such connection so that our apprehension of these eternals must occur independent of sense-perception, of desire, of pleasure, of all that is inseparable from our existence as embodied living beings. Accordingly, it is maintained that we can only hope to attain this perfect or (to use the oft-repeated word of the *Phaedo*) “pure” wisdom when we are free of the body—that is, when we are no longer alive. Here lies the link between the doctrine of the Ideas and the doctrine of the Immortality of the Soul. The immortal—and thus unchanging and eternal—soul is the vehicle by which otherwise transient humans may commune with the unchanging intelligibles.

It is, indeed, difficult to see in these doctrines—doctrines so familiar to us as Socratic—anything other than a preference for wisdom even at the cost of abandoning this world. Yet, as I will argue, this portrayal of Socrates as an otherworldly, life-denying philosopher conflicts with another famous characterization of Socratic thought, a characterization that is also present in the *Phaedo*. I refer to the traditional view that Socrates was the first of the humanizing philosophers.⁹ While the *Phaedo* is famous as a locus classicus of Socrates’ otherworldliness, it is also in this dialogue that we find Socrates’ equally famous recommendation that philosophic inquiry begin with speeches, with what people say about themselves and their world. This recommendation occurs in the intellectual autobiography that Socrates recounts in the waning moments of his life. In this autobiography, Socrates articulates the inadequacies of his predecessors which led him to adopt a new approach to the study of nature, an approach which, again, far from being otherworldly, begins with what humans say about the world. It is this approach that Socrates terms his “second sailing,” a designation indicating that his method is a next-best alternative to his original mode of investigation.

One purpose of my study is to show that the true character of Socratic rationalism is to be found in his “second sailing” rather than in the doctrines of the Ideas and the Immortality of the Soul.¹⁰ In fact,

Socrates' alteration of philosophy follows from his recognition of the insuperable difficulties of the view that promises perfect or pure wisdom. More specifically, I will show that Socrates himself realizes the inadequacy of the proofs of immortality, that indeed the several proofs, precisely in their defectiveness, constitute a meditation on those limits that our being embodied, living beings impose on our understanding. Socrates knows full well the obstacles that life poses for the possession of perfect wisdom. Thus, as far as he knows, there exists only an imperfect harmony between the human mind and perfect intelligibility as represented by the Ideas. Nor does he think that we can know that these obstacles are overcome in another existence. Whatever might be said concerning other forms of rationalism, Socratic rationalism does not rest on the dogmatically asserted foundations attributed to it by its critics. To the extent that this is the case, the characterization of Socratic thought by Nietzsche and other antifoundationalist thinkers is more aptly described as a caricature.

But then the question arises, if Socratic rationalism is not based on the Ideas, then on what does Socratic rationalism rest? One possible response to this question, offered by other commentators (who are likewise dubious concerning the link between the Ideas and Socrates' "second sailing") runs as follows. Socrates proposes that we begin rational inquiry with speeches or with opinions. These speeches express the natures or the class-characters of the things we perceive. In this view, the essence of Socratic rationalism lies in the discernment of that which is general, the class-characters, in the particulars we see before us and in the *techne* by which further ascent from these speeches is accomplished—namely, the hypothetical method.

I will argue that this is a true but partial explanation of the character of Socratic rationalism because this explanation does not adequately appreciate the extent to which the relationship between the particular and the general, especially regarding human beings, is problematic. More specifically, the foregoing response fails to confront that question of which Socrates is all too aware on his death day: how can the life of reason be justified in the face of our manifest ignorance evident not only in the limited knowledge contained in our necessarily tentative speeches, but also in the manifest ignorance about ourselves, highlighted most dramatically by oncoming death? In order to confront this question we must focus on the knowledge which leads Socrates to conclude that philosophic investigation ought to begin with an examination of what people say.¹¹

The second purpose of my study is precisely to elicit the underlying knowledge that grounds Socratic rationalism. I will argue that Socrates' new approach to nature is grounded not in some comprehensive view of

the whole of nature nor in our apprehension of the natures of things.¹² Rather, Socratic rationalism is grounded in knowledge of the human situation, in the self-understanding that Socrates gained through the recognition of the inadequacy of his previous views. Socrates sees that if we lack perfect wisdom, if we must therefore ascend toward such a comprehensive view, self-understanding—knowledge of ourselves and our relation to nature as a whole—becomes crucial. Only in this way can the philosopher acquire that wisdom, *phronesis*, that can substantiate philosophy as a choiceworthy way of life. But furthermore, such self-understanding constitutes that wisdom, *sophia*, that is available to beings such as ourselves. It is this wisdom that provides the ground of Socratic rationalism in the sense of serving as a criterion for knowledge.

The traditional view is therefore correct when it sees in Socrates' alteration of philosophy the origin of political philosophy.¹³ For political philosophy is the study of human affairs, a study which, as I will argue, is inseparable from the consideration of humanity's place in the whole. Political philosophy is first taken seriously not only to provide a practical defense of philosophy against the political community but also to provide a ground for the activity of philosophy itself. Political philosophy remains at the heart of philosophic investigation because it provides the best access to the knowledge of nature itself.

Socratic rationalism does not then rest on some implausible or anachronistic cosmology. Nor does it squint at those difficulties which have led contemporary thinkers to abandon rationalism. Beginning as it does in self-understanding, it is especially aware of those aspects of humanity, exemplified by the questions surrounding our mortality, that seem to resist rational scrutiny. Plato's Socrates, I will argue, offers the possibility of a rationalism that denies the existence of an insuperable distinction between life and wisdom. The two purposes of my study, then, lead to the conclusion that Socratic rationalism—political philosophy in its original form—may yet offer a basis for rational inquiry that is both non-dogmatic and nonarbitrary.

Mode of Interpretation

I follow the view that every detail in the Platonic dialogues, the form as well as the content, is a product of—and thus illustrative of—Plato's intention. An interpretation of a dialogue must therefore heed not only the arguments but also the ways in which the arguments are defective. It must heed as well the nondiscursive elements of the dialogue such

as the setting and the characters of the interlocutors, including that of Socrates.¹⁴ This principle directs the primary effort of interpretation toward explaining the coherency of the dialogue as a whole. Thus, for example, in the face of what are widely agreed to be the *Phaedo's* defective arguments for immortality, an attempt must be made to explain the positive teaching that Plato means to convey through these particular defects. Moreover, any plausible interpretation must also explain why Plato chooses to convey his understanding through such roundabout means.

I adopt this principle as the safest—that is, the least distorting—of interpretive principles. Other principles of interpretation, such as those that refer to Plato's intellectual development or to his historical context, preclude from the start the most serious consideration of Plato's thought. In order to judge Plato's development, we would have to know better than does Plato the issues with which his work is concerned. But if we already possess such knowledge, then we need hardly turn to Plato for guidance concerning these issues. Moreover, even if our *goal* is simply to understand what Plato thought about these issues, we cannot rely on an interpretive principle—the developmental principle—that assumes that we already have grasped the ultimate character of Platonic thought. Finally, interpreting Plato as a product of his historical context is to adopt in advance Nietzsche's view of one of the most important issues in his quarrel with Plato. The principle I have adopted is itself open to dangers, principally the danger of idiosyncratic and implausible interpretations. But these can be corrected through the marshalling of evidence either to support or to contravene such interpretations. This potential damage is far less costly than an interpretive principle that would deny the ultimate significance of the work from the start.

I want to say one more thing about interpretation that bears specifically on the *Phaedo*. As is clear from what I have said, my interpretation of this dialogue depends on a distinction between two incompatible teachings in the dialogue. I would not characterize this distinction as one between the surface and the depths because the expressions of both teachings are often both on the surface—as exemplified above all in the tension between the otherworldliness of the doctrine of the Immortality of the Soul—and the this-worldliness of Socrates' intellectual autobiography. The latter teaching is less evident, however, in that it requires us to take seriously Socrates' qualifications of his teaching which are explicit but not emphasized. Specifically, we must appreciate the extent to which these qualifications, when taken together, amount to a rejection rather than a mere modification of the main teaching. We shall heed those heterodoxical statements which Socrates states explicitly for all to hear only

if we are not deafened by our expectations of what Socrates will say. The distinction to which I am pointing then might best be characterized as a distinction between more and less reflective readings of the dialogue. The plausibility of any reading depends upon the interpreter making as clear as possible the path that runs between the less reflective and the more reflective interpretation. Again, this requires that the interpreter show in each case the *necessity* for traversing this path as well as the reason that Plato has chosen to present his teaching so as to require such interpretation.

Two recent book-length studies of the *Phaedo*, Kenneth Dorter's *Plato's "Phaedo": An Interpretation* and Ronna Burger's *The "Phaedo": A Platonic Labyrinth*, share the same interpretive premises as the present study.¹⁵ These works reflect an unusually acute sensitivity to the dialogue form, and I have learned much from these authors. Yet, as Burger suggests in distinguishing herself from Dorter, agreement on the importance of the dialogue form does not produce a necessarily uniform result; the need for interpretation carries with it the possibility of a variety of such interpretations.¹⁶ I would distinguish my own interpretation from both Dorter and Burger on the basis of the observation made by David Bolotin that they "do not pay... sufficient attention to the surface of the dialogue."¹⁷ What Bolotin means by this is that they do not take as seriously as they should Socrates' own expressions of his fears and doubts regarding death. While I think that this criticism applies somewhat more strongly to Dorter than to Burger, my attempt has been to exceed both authors in giving such expressions their full weight.

This leads to a substantive difference between our interpretations. In my view, Socrates sees the status of philosophic activity as much more fundamentally challenged by those uncertainties introduced into human existence by the fact of death. Philosophy is more questionable for Socrates than appears in either Dorter's or Burger's interpretation and thus more in need of a defense. I see Socrates' "second sailing" as indicating that the character of such a defense rests on an understanding of the human situation. Therefore, I also emphasize more than does either Dorter or Burger the traditional view which saw in Socrates' alteration of philosophy the origin of the philosophic treatment of human affairs—the origin of political philosophy.