

socrates

George Rudebusch



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socrates



Statue in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, made 3500 BCE in the Cyclades Islands. Photograph taken by author. The statue, arms over chest, is in the position of a dead body in burial, suggesting a body without a soul. There are other remarkable features: the statue is feminine (as souls are in Greek language), with an elongated neck, oversized and mis-shaped head, and absent eyes in a face that by its posture nonetheless seems to be looking at something. All these features make the statue less a representation of a body than of *that which is perceptive when dissociated from the body*, namely, a soul viewing the transcendent. As I interpret Socrates, it was the nature of his soul, most distinctively, to see the transcendent in human life. In this way the image, though predating Socrates by 2000 years, gives us a picture of his very soul.

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*To
Hope*

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translations used	

Unattributed translations are mine, except for Bible translations, which are from the New American Standard. The line references I use are standard and should give the reader little trouble.

introduction

Goals of This Book

Plato's dialogues tell a story about Socrates' life, focusing on conversations about human excellence. This book follows that life from age 36 to age 70, from mastery over the "wisest man" Protagoras to death by poison. In those conversations, the conclusions Socrates reaches – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly – are wild:

- No human being knows how to live.
- Bravery, benevolence, righteousness, reverence, the best sort of luck – even the ability to interpret the most divine poetry – are all one and the same thing: expertise at human well-being.
- Such expertise by itself would require the needy love of any human being, rule the psyche (or soul, as I shall call it) without inner conflict, and ensure happiness and freedom.
- Lacking that expertise, we are guilty of the worst sort of negligence if we do not spend our lives trying to discover it – better not to live at all!

Socrates' arguments eliciting these results are open to obvious objections. Readers who take the objections to be successful have two interpretive options. One is to suppose that Socrates spent his life fascinated by what we easily see to be poor arguments. The second option is to suppose that Socrates did not intend such arguments seriously, but was being playful for some reason or other.

I propose a third option. Finding convincing replies to the obvious objections, I take Socrates' results seriously and endorse the interpretation Alcibiades gives in Plato's *Symposium*. Alcibiades compares Socrates' arguments to "those statues of Silenus that open down the middle" (221d8–e1). This Silenus was a satyr, a mythical creature having a distorted human face and upper body, with the lower body of a goat. Silenus was ridiculous as a lusting drunkard, ever driven by sexual desire and incapable of sober thought – yet these very acts were his worship of

the god Dionysus. Hidden inside the grotesque hollow statue was a beautiful *agalma*, that is, a holy image of the god, carved as an act of worship. The *agalma* would delight the lucky person who found it inside. Just so, Alcibiades says,

Socrates' arguments seem ridiculous the first time you listen . . . but if you see them taken apart and get inside of them, you will find them to be the only arguments that are reasonable, arguments that are the most godlike, arguments holding inside a wealth of *agalmata* of divine excellence, arguments that are largely – no, *completely* – intent on everything proper for becoming a noble and good man.

221e1–222a4

I follow Alcibiades, seeing in Socrates' arguments the power to bring joy and propriety to human lives.

I emphasize that there are alternatives to my interpretation. While some commentators prefer the first two options I mention above, others prefer a fourth option, which is to take Socrates' arguments seriously, but to give tame interpretations of his conclusions. For example, some have interpreted the wild idea that *expertise ensures happiness* as the tame conventional wisdom that *good people make the best of their circumstances*. The wild idea that any life that does not consist of philosophical examination is *not worth living* becomes the tame advice that an examined life is *the only hope for improving ourselves*. Such taming has advantages: it both judges Socrates' arguments to be good and at the same time leaves conventional moral wisdom unthreatened. Nonetheless, I urge that we recognize the possibility of a deeper and truer moral sensibility than conventional wisdom. Rather than construe Socrates' *view* in the manner most *plausible* by our lights, my goal is to find what in Socratic *argument* will *compel* our assent, even if it turns human life upside down.

Thus 14 chapters that follow aim to show how Socrates gives compelling arguments for wild conclusions. Upon hearing Socrates in the *Gorgias*, Callicles appropriately replied: "If what you say turns out to be true, aren't we human beings living our lives upside down and doing everything quite the opposite of what we ought?" (481c2–5). I agree with Callicles that everything important in human life hangs on the question whether Socrates' views are true.

Socrates speaks to us in ordinary language as human beings, not as academic specialists. It is not rocket science, but it is a philosophical project. Socrates' *method* – beginning from premises accepted by his conversation partner and arguing step by step in ordinary language – to a large degree created the academic discipline of philosophy in European history. Plato and Aristotle took up many of the topics investigated by

Socrates, and those topics have remained essential in the academic tradition of western philosophy. People to this day who have had only one philosophy course are more likely to have read a Socratic dialogue than anything else.

In my opinion the philosophical tradition has not given Socrates' *results* the attention they deserve. His results are as surprising today as they were in his day. Yet it would be difficult to overstate how much my project depends upon a half-century of scholarship that uses the tools of analytic philosophy to interpret and evaluate the premises, inferences, and conclusions of Socratic arguments.

In addition to my goal of providing to readers a conversation with a philosophically astute Socrates, I have another goal. This is to recognize Socrates the Philosopher as one of the great religious inspirations of world history, comparable to such others as Confucius the Master, Krishna the Lord, Siddhartha the Buddha, Jesus the Christ, and Mohammad the Prophet – as they are called by their devotees. These cultural fountainheads make different and sometimes incompatible statements about supernatural beings and the institution of religion in society. But they share the theme that *single-minded devotion to righteousness, done as a holy sacrament, is ideal life*. In chapters 15 and 16 I propose a life of Socratic philosophy not as an alternative to the life of religious devotion but as itself the heavenly way for human beings to live, through the sacrament of cross-examination about human excellence.

To a far greater extent than other religious teachers, we possess in Plato's dialogues step-by-step arguments aimed at demonstrating the truth of their shared theme. It is by considering objections and replies to these arguments that I propose to help readers decide its truth. To put it grandly, my goal is to lead philosophers to religion, to lead the religious to philosophy, and to lead those who are neither to both.

Who Was Socrates?

The Confucius, Siddhartha, and Jesus who have shaped world history are the characters preserved in classic texts. It is a matter of doubt to what degree those texts accurately present historical persons. Likewise the Socrates who has greatly influenced the course of history is the character we find in Plato's dialogues. This Socrates in some ways (but not others) is similar to the Socrates presented in other ancient texts, most extensively in Aristophanes and Xenophon.

Readers want to know to what degree Plato's Socrates is fictional and whether in important ways he *is* the historical figure. I save that question for the epilogue. It is appropriate to put that question last, not first,

in this book. The important question for this book – like the important question for us as human beings – is not the *particular flesh and blood* who uttered these words but the *great mind* in the text for us to understand, whether that mind is a literary creation or a historically accurate account.

I sometimes (such as in chapter 5) contrast views of Socrates as he appears in different dialogues written by Plato. It is confusing to speak of Socrates and “another Socrates.” Following Aristotle, I refer to the *other Socrates* as Plato, even when the *other Socrates* speaks in the same dialogue with Socrates (as in chapter 16)! In the epilogue I defend the use of Aristotle’s distinction as a working hypothesis. But none of the book’s goals requires that the distinction between Socrates and the *other Socrates* be more than a convenience for talking about different threads of discussion found in Plato’s dialogues.

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interpreting socrates

What does it take properly to interpret Socrates? A conversation that Socrates has at age 56 tells us. The conversation is with Ion, a professional *rhapsode*, that is, one who recites and interprets poetic texts. With Ion, Socrates reaches a surprising conclusion: the best interpreter of Homer is not a Homer specialist like Ion, but an expert in human well-being. The same expert, it turns out, will also be the best interpreter of Socrates.

Homer

After getting Ion to recite a passage on chariot racing, Socrates asks a question that is easy for Ion to answer:

SOCRATES: Tell me what Nestor says to his son Antilochus, when he advises him how to take the turn well in the chariot race honoring Patroclus.

ION: (reciting Homer's *Iliad*, 23.335–40): *Lean*, he says:

Lean in the smooth chariot, just to the left of the pair.
Then goad the right-hand horse
As you shout him on and give him free rein.
Let the left-hand horse skin by the turning post,
So the hub built into your wheel seems to touch the edge
– But keep from striking that stone!

SOCRATES: Enough. Now who would know better, Ion, whether or not Homer speaks correctly with these words, a doctor or a charioteer?

ION: A charioteer, of course.

537a5–c3

Socrates and Ion leave unspecified what it is for Homer to “speak correctly” in these lines. There are many possible standards by which to judge the correctness of these lines. Was Homer speaking correctly in *reporting Nestor’s words*? – such a question calls for the expertise of

a historian or biographer. Neither a charioteer nor a doctor can answer such a question. Again, if someone wanted to know if Homer was speaking correctly in his *use of poetic form* (for instance, whether the Greek is in proper dactylic hexameter), we would need expertise in poetic grammar to answer. Ion might even have replied to Socrates' question as follows: "A doctor – since it is by expertise in *medical risk* of chariot injuries that we know whether Homer speaks correctly about permitting one's son to participate in chariot racing."

As it happens, Ion evidently takes the words *speaking correctly* to mean speaking correctly about *how to win a chariot race*, not about *whether there is acceptable medical risk in chariot racing*. If we interpret Socrates' words *speaking correctly* the same way as Ion, then we will approve Ion's answer. Ion correctly states that an expert charioteer is a better judge than an expert doctor whether Homer in this passage speaks correctly about how to race a chariot.

Ion goes on to agree to Socrates' generalization from charioteering to any expertise: "Then he who lacks any expertise will not be able to discern well either the words or actions of that expertise?" – "True" (538a5–b1). When it comes to judging good and bad speech about chariot racing, not only is a doctor inferior to a charioteer, so is a rhapsode – even when the speeches are in Homer and the rhapsode is a specialist in Homer. The same is true for judging good and bad speeches about fishing, medicine, and reading omens about the future. The rhapsode will be inferior to the respective experts at assessing the value of the speeches for achieving goals in the spheres of the respective expertises. Ion is right to agree with Socrates.

Now Socrates challenges Ion. As Socrates has pointed out passages in Homer that belong to other expertises, he asks Ion to identify the speeches in Homer that belong to the expertise of the rhapsode, passages which the rhapsode *by his expertise* is able to consider and evaluate better than non-experts. Ion tries to say this is true of *all* the passages in Homer (539e6). After Socrates reminds him that by Ion's own admission "the rhapsode's expertise cannot know everything" (540a5–6), Ion gives a more promising answer. The rhapsode's expertise includes "what's proper for a man to say, or a woman, and a slave or freeman; and a ruler or his subject" (540b3–5).

I judge Ion's answer more promising because it comes close to what Socrates himself stated earlier in the dialogue as the topic of "the most divine of poets," Homer (530b10). According to Socrates, such poetry deals with "war, mainly, as well as *social* relationships of human beings with each other, both good and bad, lay and professional, and the relationships of the gods both with each other and with humans, and events in the heavens and in the underworld, and the genesis of gods and heroes" (531c4–d1). Socrates' statement separates poetry from charioteering,

fishing, prophecy, and other such arts. Charioteering expertise knows the relations between humans and *chariots* in *racing*. Fishing expertise knows the relations between humans and *fish* in *catching*. Expertise in prophecy knows the relations between humans and *the future* in *reading omens*. By contrast, the main topics of poetry are, first, the relations between humans and *humans* – be they good or bad, lay or professional – in both *war* and *society*; second, the relations between humans and *the gods*; third, the relations between *gods* and *gods*, including supernatural events (that is, events “in the heavens and in the underworld”). Finally, just as the expert at charioteering knows the origin of an expert charioteer – how to make a *hero* or *god* of chariot racing, as it were – so likewise does the expert at the main topic of poetry know how a hero and even a god come to be.

Socrates’ statement of the topic of poetry makes it a matter of universal and ultimate human concern. For example, the Bible is ultimately concerned with humanity and divinity as opposed to, say, chariot racing or fishing. We might read the Ten Commandments as giving us a list of religious duties to God (“Remember the Sabbath!”) and moral duties to other humans (“Thou shalt not murder!”). Confucius is a second example, from an independent cultural tradition of equal authority. Of ultimate concern to Confucius is *rén* 仁, that is, *the proper way to live among human beings*. In many ways Confucius is as unconcerned with the gods as any atheist. Yet according to Confucius perfect human life will be lived entirely as *lǐ* 禮, that is, as an act of religious devotion in the presence of the divine.¹

Socrates’ account of poetry explains the ultimate benefit and exalted transcendence poetry and great literature in general have. And just as Ion and Socrates understand the chariot speech in Homer not as mere description or history but rather as words advising *how to attain a goal*, likewise we should understand Socrates’ statement of the topic of poetry to include words that advise us *how to attain our ultimate goals* as human beings with other human beings and before the gods.

I readily admit that not all poetry aims to help one comprehend and achieve the ultimate aims of human life. Some write poetry simply to communicate an emotion, experience, or point of view. Often we choose literature for entertainment rather than edification. Nonetheless, I say, Socrates’ account is correct. For he and Ion agreed upon the scope of their discussion of poetry at the beginning of their conversation: they were concerned with “the best and most divine of poets” (530b10), the most notable of whom in their time was Homer. I cannot conceive a better or more divine topic for any poetry than what Socrates himself stated.

Ion, therefore, is giving a promising answer to Socrates’ question – *What parts of Homer are in the scope of the rhapsode’s expertise?* – when he says, “what’s proper for a man to say, or a woman, and a slave

or freeman; and a ruler or his subject.” But when Socrates tests Ion’s answer, Ion fails to distinguish what a man ought to say as a ruler of *men* from what a man ought to say as a ruler of *soldiers* or *sailors*.

SOCRATES: Are you saying that the rhapsode will know better than the pilot the sort of thing to say when you’re ruling a ship at sea and get hit by a storm?
 ION: No, the pilot knows better in that case . . .
 SOCRATES: Well, will he know what’s proper for a man to say, when he is a general advising soldiers?
 ION: Yes, that sort of thing the rhapsode will know.
 SOCRATES: What? The expertise of the rhapsode is the expertise of the *general*?

540b6–d4

Although Ion fails, there is a successful answer to Socrates’ question. I take it that Socrates would agree that a terrorist, for example, might be ever so successful as a ruler of soldiers, or a pirate as a ruler of sailors, yet at the same time they might be failures both as human beings and as rulers of human beings, reckoning that failure in terms of personal depravity or wretchedness. Likewise it is possible to be an excellent doctor, cowherd, or weaver but at the same time be defective as a human being.

Socrates in fact makes this very distinction near the end of the *Charmides*, using nearly the same set of examples of other kinds of expertise in contrast to the expertise at doing well *as a human being*.

SOCRATES: Knowledgeable living does not make us do well and be happy, not even living according to all the other branches of knowledge together, but only according to this single knowledge of good and bad. For, Critias, if you choose to take away this knowledge from all the others, will medicine any the less give us health, or shoemaking give us shoes, or weaving give us clothes, or will the pilot’s expertise any the less prevent us dying at sea, or the general’s in war?
 CRITIAS: None the less.
 SOCRATES: But, my dear Critias, if this knowledge is missing, none of these things are well and beneficially given.

174b12–d1

Socrates goes on to describe *this single knowledge of good and bad* as the expertise “whose business is to benefit us” (174d3–4), that is, *us ourselves* as opposed to benefiting our health, shoes, clothes, or wars.
 With this distinction between expertise at human benefit and the other forms of expertise, we can reinstate Ion’s retracted claim (at 539e6) that the rhapsode is the best person to evaluate *every* passage in Homer,

6	the <i>ion</i>