CULTURE AND THE ABSURD: SOCRATES' STATEMENTS THROUGH THE LENS OF GREEK VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS

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GREK 4090

April 13, 2018

I. Introduction

A previous paper discussed the idea of whether or not Socrates was seeking to provoke the jurors and get himself executed, or trying to save himself by means of his speech. This topic will be continued in the final paper. This paper, however, will deal with a narrower topic: statements that appear at face value to be absurd or out of place in a serious discussion with life and death consequences. Absurdity is, as we shall have occasion to examine, a culturally dependent phenomenon, and is somewhat subjective. So an argument could be made that the examples selected in this paper are in some way unrepresentative or skewed. I leave such a determination up to the reader.

This paper will examine the idea of absurdity in the context of Athenian culture around the time of Socrates trial, and will attempt to shed light on some statements in the *Apology* that were perhaps taken by the jurors to be absurd, or at least seem likely to have been taken as absurd. Cultural norms and expectations will be discussed with respect to the particular examples, as the length and scope of this paper allow.

II. References to literature

There are a few passages in the *Apology* wherein Socrates compares himself and/or his situation to figures and occurrences from the Greek canon of mythology and epic. This section will first examine some examples of the phenomenon, then discuss the potential absurdity of the comparisons vis-à-vis the Greeks' valuation of said canon.

Perhaps the most obvious example of a potentially-absurd literary allusion is Socrates' comparison of his attitude in the face of death with Achilles'. In 28c Socrates summarizes Thetis' warning to her son about the cost of his involvement in the Trojan war, saying "ὃς… παρὰ τὸ αἰσχρόν τι ὑπομεῖναι… τοῦ μὲν θανάτου καὶ τοῦ κινδύνου ὠλιγώρησε, πολὺ δὲ μᾶλλον

δείσας τὸ ζῆν κακὸς ὢν καὶ τοῖς φίλοις μὴ τιμωρεῖν"[1] – "Who… rather than endure anything shameful… esteemed death and danger little, much more fearing to live as a bad man and not to avenge his friends." Socrates then goes on to describe the supposed parallels between his responsibility to philosophize despite potential consequences and Achilles responsibility to avenge his friend's death despite potential consequences: "ἐγὼ οὖν δεινὰ ἂν εἴην εἰργασμένος… ἐνταῦθα δὲ φοβηθεὶς ἢ θάνατον ἢ ἄλλ᾽ ὁτιοῦν πρᾶγμα λίποιμι τὴν τάξιν"[2] – "So I would have been doing terrible things… [if] here I had left my post [from the god], fearing either death or any other things whatsoever."

Another good example is Socrates comparing his unjust execution with the deaths of Ajax and Palamedes. After being sentenced to death, Socrates muses on the possibility of being in Hades with various people of legendary renown, and offhandedly includes a comparison to these figures of mythology whose demises were often considered unjust: "…ὁπότε ἐντύχοιμι Παλαμήδει καὶ Αἴαντι τῷ Τελαμῶνος καὶ εἴ τις ἄλλος τῶν παλαιῶν διὰ κρίσιν ἄδικον τέθνηκεν, ἀντιπαραβάλλοντι τὰ ἐμαυτοῦ πάθη πρὸς τὰ ἐκείνων…"[3] – "…when I chanced upon Palamede and Ajax, the son of Telemon, and any other of the ancients who died through unjust judgement, comparing my experience with the experiences of those…" The typical narrative regarding Ajax' death is that he committed suicide after being bested by the cleverness of Odysseus in a dispute over the Hephaestus-forged armor of fallen Achilles (an unfitting and unjust way for him to meet his end, considering his role as the bulwark keeping the Trojans at bay for much of the *Iliad*).[4] According to many traditions, Palamedes too fell at the hand of Odysseus, after Odysseus

[1] Miller, *Plato's Apology of Socrates*, 82-83. Text: 28c:2-28d:1.
[2] Ibid. 84-85. Text: 28d:10-29a:1.
[3] Ibid. 143. Text: 41b:1-4.
[4] See, for example, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 229-297. Text: Book 13 of the *Metamorphoses*. Cf. the note on 41b:2 in Miller, *Plato's Apology of Socrates*.

planted evidence of treachery in revenge for getting him involved in the Trojan war by exposing his ruse of madness.[5] Thus, in this hypothetical situation, Socrates could chat with mythological heroes about the hubristic actions and words of clever men/deceivers (represented by Odysseus – and presumably, Socrates would want us to reason, Meletus and company), and swap "unjust death stories."

There are various other literary allusions in the *Apology*. For example, Socrates indirectly compares his labor for the god to Hercules' labors: "δεῖ δὴ ὑμῖν τὴν ἐμὴν πλάνην ἐπιδεῖξαι ὥσπερ πόνους τινὰς πονοῦντος ἵνα μοι καὶ ἀνέλεγκτος ἡ μαντεία γένοιτο" [6] – "Indeed, it is necessary to show you my wandering, as a performing of certain labors (i.e., like those of Hercules) for me, in order that the oracle would also come to pass unrefuted." He also, when making the point that he could produce family members for emotional effect, compares himself implicitly with Odysseus: "τὸ τοῦ Ὁμήρου, οὐδ᾽ ἐγὼ 'ἀπὸ δρυὸς οὐδ᾽ ἀπὸ πέτρης' πέφυκα ἀλλ᾽ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων, ὥστε καὶ οἰκεῖοί μοί εἰσι…"[7] – "I am not, as Homer has it, produced 'from an oak or a rock,' but from men, so that even I have relatives…"

So what are we to make of all this – Socrates comparing himself with the likes of Achilles, Ajax, Hercules, and Odysseus? Would this be perceived as absurd to the jurors, as it now seems somewhat absurd to us – and perhaps even more so? The evidence we have about the

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[5] Incidentally, Palamedes is actually mentioned in the passage concerning Ajax above (Ovid, Metamorphoses, 250-251. Text: 13.306ff.). Cf. again the note on 41b:2 in Miller, *Plato's Apology of Socrates*.

[6] Miller, *Plato's Apology of Socrates*, 49. Text: 22a:6-8.

[7] Ibid. 111-112, Text: 34d:4-6. See also the note on 34d:4. Cf. also West, *Four Texts on Socrates*, 88 (in footnote 62): "The phrase 'from an oak or a rock' occurs twice in Homer. (1) In the *Odyssey*, when Penelope asks her husband Odysseus, who has return home in disguise, to tell her of his ancestry, she says, 'for you are not of an oak of ancient story, or a rock." Odysseus responds with a tale full of "many falsehoods" (XIX.163, 203). (2) In the *Iliad*, Hector utters this phrase pathetically in his last speech to himself before he is killed by Achilles (XXII.126)."

Greeks' relationship with their literary canon suggests that this is the case. For there is much scholarship on the continued importance of literature on Greek thought and society, and the high esteem that the Greeks had for it.[8] Socrates inserting himself into the literary framework, in some sense, would thus be analogous to someone in our society comparing themselves and/or their situation to Christ and his passion, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington and their contributions to democracy, and so forth – people and situations that blur the line between history, mythology, and idealized simulacrums tailored for value transmission (i.e., fables).

III. Statements of megalomania and grandiosity

There are some situations in the *Apology* that, at least viewed with a modern lens, seem to portray Socrates and his statements as somewhat absurd on account of apparent narcissism. Whether or not these statements are justified – and thus whether or not they may be at all narcissistic – will not be discussed so much as how they might have been perceived as absurd given the cultural backdrop of the day.

Socrates says concerning his service (emphasis mine): "ταῦτα γὰρ κελεύει ὁ θεός, εὖ ἴστε, καὶ ἐγὼ οἶομαι **οὐδέν πω ὑμῖν μεῖζον ἀγαθὸν γενέσθαι** ἐν τῇ πόλει ἢ τὴν ἐμὴν τῷ θεῷ ὑπηρεσίαν"[9] – "Indeed, know well that the god orders these things. And I suppose that **no greater good has ever yet (πω) arisen for you** in the city than my service to the god." Somewhat earlier, when describing the general character of his service, Socrates even said that he comes to the aid of the god in his refutation of others: "ἐγὼ μὲν ἔτι καὶ νῦν περιὼν ζητῶ καὶ ἐρευνῶ κατὰ τὸν θεὸν καὶ τῶν ἀστῶν καὶ ξένων ἄν τινα οἴωμαι σοφὸν εἶναι: καὶ ἐπειδάν μοι μὴ

[8] To see but two examples, consider Fairbanks, "Literary Influence in the Development of Greek Religion," and a more modern (and more comprehensive) work: Patterson, *Kinship Myth in Ancient Greece*.
[9] Miller, *Plato's Apology of Socrates*, 89. Text: 30a:5-7.

δοκῇ, **τῷ θεῷ βοηθῶν** ἐνδείκνυμαι ὅτι οὐκ ἔστι σοφός"[10] – "Even now I still go around seeking and investigating in accordance with the god any townsman or foreigner I suppose to be wise. And whenever someone does not seem so to me, **coming to the god's aid**, I show that he is not wise." Finally, when discussing his role with regards to the city, Socrates goes so far as to say "εὖ γὰρ ἴστε, ἐάν με ἀποκτείνητε τοιοῦτον ὄντα οἷον ἐγὼ λέγω, **οὐκ ἐμὲ μείζω βλάψετε ἢ ὑμᾶς αὐτούς**"[11] – "For know well that if you kill me, since I am the sort of man that I say I am, **you will not harm me more than yourselves**."

Now, perhaps these statements were true and valid points for Socrates to make. But given the nature of Athenian conceptions of influence and relevance, Socrates claims to importance would have seemed absurd. Then, as at most places and times in history, political leaders and the aristocratic "high society" of poets and athletes were the movers and shakers of society. One might note, for example, the sort of people present at Agathon's banquet in Plato's *Symposium*. Now, Socrates was not entirely incapable of interacting with this group (as his dealings with Alcibiades in that work, for example, would indicate), but it is rather improper to assign him a place in it. Plato, for example, belonged to a much more prestigious family than did Socrates.

This is all especially relevant when one considers the commanding importance of politics in Greek (and particularly Athenian) society. Hebert Weir Smyth (of grammar fame) states that "The intensity of Hellenic political life was so feverish that even the writers of the *Federalist* inveighed against its restlessness and turbulence."[12] We may note the example of Alcibiades, mentioned above, who through his importance and participation in the system found himself variously fighting for both Athens and Sparta during the Peloponnesian war. Alcibiades was

[10] Ibid. 56. Text: 23b:4-6.
[11] Ibid. 91. Text: 30c:6-8.
[12] Smyth, "Aspects of Greek Conservatism," 50.

influential. Socrates? Well, depending on how much you buy Plato's descriptions of things, Socrates wielded a certain kind of power, but even so it was most certainly not because people found him to be important and influential, but that he proved to be so *despite* appearances. Socrates himself takes pains the *Apology* to address his obvious lack of political influence by attempting to rationalize his lack of participation in politics, saying, in effect, that moral individuals cannot survive in politics.[13]

Of course, politicians were not the only important people. Poets and athletes too shared an amount of genuine power, influence, and honor. This is why Socrates' proposed "penalty" of taking meals at the Prytaneum would have similarly seemed absurd: given the celebrity that victorious athletes enjoyed (not unlike the sports stars of today), Socrates' request cut directly opposite the grain of conventional expectations, which is likely why it provoked the jurors. (Socrates was sentenced to death by a significantly higher margin than he was convicted of charges… a situation difficult to explain without such an understanding).

IV. Discussion

It is clear that some of Socrates' statements in the *Apology* that might have been perceived as absurd depend heavily upon cultural factors. For us modern readers, it is important to place these statements in context when reading the *Apology*, to try and experience Socrates' arguments from the point of view of someone living at the turn of the 4th century B.C. Only then can we truly understand the impact that such words might have had, and consider what sort of emotional reactions they might have provoked.[14]

[13] Miller, *Plato's Apology of Socrates,* 97-98. Text: 31d:6ff.
[14] Such a concept will prove to be important in my final paper for this class.

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