

Yet Another Writing About Socrates

Answering “Why is Socrates considered as a turning point in philosophy?”

Life and Lifestyle

Socrates was born in or around 470 BC to Sophroniscus and Phaenarete. His father was a sculptor or stonemason and his mother was a midwife. In his teen years, he is likely to have been trained as a stonemason and crafted many statues. After that, he served in the Athenian army and won a reputation for his bravery. Later he joined the office in the Assembly. Socrates had always been upright which made him unpopular with rich and ruling people. Socrates is so important that all the philosophical work before him is lumped together by historians under the name ‘Pre-Socratic’. Yet he left no written work of his own. Many contemporaries describe his look as shabby and ugly, pot-bellied and snub-nosed. Socrates seems to have been a sophist of an unusual kind. Like the sophists, he spent much of his time in discussion with young men. But unlike others, he charged no fees, and his method of education was not to instruct but to question. He used to say that his job is similar to that of his mother’s, midwifery, to make people born again with more logical ideology.

In Greece, great attention was paid to the oracles (priestess). One of them stated that there is no one wiser than Socrates. In those days he used to question people who claim to be experts in their respective fields. None of them was able to defend their reputation against his cross-questioning, and Socrates concluded that the oracle was correct in that he alone realized that his own wisdom was worth nothing. Socrates strongly believed that who really knew what it was right to do could not do wrong; if anyone did what was wrong, it must be because he did not know what was right. Those who do wrong unintentionally are in need of instruction, not punishment. This philosophy, his uprightness, constant questioning of reputed figures has landed him in the trail and eventually death sentence by the Athenian court.

The Trail

No original transcript of his trail was available but there are few dramatized versions of it written by his contemporaries. One of the best is by Plato. Plato describes, not just his persecution but also his thinking, decision making and beliefs using different characters

that interact with him. This section is a brief version of the trial, taken mainly from Apology, highlighting the ideology of Socrates.

Basically, he was accused of the introduction of strange gods, and the corruption of Athenian youth. At some point in the proceedings, Socrates was given a chance to go free on condition of abandoning philosophical inquiry. He refused it by saying "Men of Athens, I honour and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy". He considered asking for a moderate fine – one too large for him to pay himself, but which Plato and his friends were willing to pay on his behalf. The judges regarded the fine as unrealistically small and passed a sentence of death. He also refused to produce in court his weeping children as objects of compassion because as he says that he is a person who seeks justice and not mercy. Some of his last words are - "Is death a dreamless sleep? Such sleep is more blessed than most nights and days in the life of even the most fortunate mortal. Is death a journey to another world? He has so many questions to put to the great men and women of the past: and in the next world, no one will be put to death for asking questions. When the hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways – I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows."

Method of discussion and cross-examination

This section has two dialogues between Socrates and his associates as described by Plato, no one knows how much in these dialogues is history, and how much invention! These dialogues give us an insight into his approach to philosophy.

While he is waiting for his prosecution, Socrates meets a young man, Euthyphro who came to Athens to prosecute a charge of murder against his father. Euthyphro's father had apprehended a farm-labourer who had killed a servant; while sending him to Athens for his punishment, he had him tied up and thrown into a ditch, where he died of hunger. This is really a dilemma like, is killing a murderer really a murder? But Euthyphro is adamant and thinks of it as an unholy activity. This leads to a debate between Socrates and Euthyphro about what really is holiness. Euthyphro says holiness is what the gods love, and unholy is what they hate. Socrates counters that definition by saying "if something is loved by some gods and hated by others, it will turn out to be both holy and unholy". He also asks "Do the gods love what is holy because it is holy, or is it holy because the gods love it? ". Euthyphro, even though being a learned scholar never actually faced questions like this, so he thinks about it for a while and answers that the gods love what is holy because it is holy. This answer brings us back to the question "What is holy in the first place?". This discussion between them goes on and Socrates asks questions like "Can godly substitute holy?", "Should holiness be identified as service to god?", "By offering our services are we making them (gods) any better than they are?" etc. Every question either turns the discussion into a new direction or makes him agree with Socrates.

In the final days before his execution. A number of his friends, led by Crito, have devised a plan for Socrates to escape and flee out of the country. Socrates was in a dilemma whether the life purchased by disobedience to the laws was a life worth living. Later that night, he imagines Athens questioning him - "Did we not bring you into existence? By our aid, your father married your mother and begat you. We also commanded your father to educate you in body and mind. Has a philosopher like you failed to discover that our country is more precious and higher and holier than mother or father or any ancestor? ...". This thought made him believe that by staying in the country (at his young age) he made a contract that he will do as the law's command. So he refused Crito's offer and went on to accept the death penalty.

Winding-up

These are some of my thoughts about philosophy and Socrates. Over time philosophy was linked up with science, religion, politics etc but today one can clearly see the distinction among these studies. If we look at the transformation closely we can observe that; thought that all the substances are made of small, indivisible particles is philosophy before one tested or seen it, but it is science afterwards; a group of people having common beliefs is philosophy before one gave them a name or god but, it is religion afterwards; a community living together is guided by philosophy before there is a written constitution or judicial system but it is a political system afterwards. We can see that anything that is getting concretized is drifting apart from philosophy. Love, life, ethics are few things which are still questioned and are major topics of present-day philosophical debates. With all this discussion we can firmly say that philosophy is questioning something until you really know or see it. Socrates did this with everything and everyone including himself (Imaginary dialogue with Athens) that he came across, for a major part of his life. Maybe that's why he is considered as a turning point in philosophy.

References

Below are some sources which I read before attempting this writing.

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Name: Arabhi Subhash

Roll No. : cs17b005