Why Was Socrates Executed? And Other Papers on Plato By J.-M. Kuczynski

# Why was Socrates executed?

Why was Socrates executed? Here is the standard response.

“Socrates tried to red pill his fellow Athenians. They didn’t want to be red pilled. So they executed him.”

That is not the reason. It is the opposite of the real reason. The real reason is the reason his executioners gave. The real reason is that Socrates tried to blue pill his fellow Athenians with confusing and irrelevant sophistries; and rather than waste time and effort trying to combat those sophistries on their own terms, they executed him.

During the period in question, Athens was involved in a bitter civil war. In the context of a war, especially when the war in question is a civil war, all confusing discussions relating to politics must be assumed to be what the Soviets referred to as ‘agit-prop’---propaganda designed to confuse and agitate. Socrates caused Athenians to question their pre-existing moral beliefs, which undermined their patriotism at a time when Athens most needed it. It may well be that Socrates’ criticisms of those beliefs were valid. But Socrates, so it appears, was not on trial for speaking falsely but for being disruptive; and he very much seems to have been guilty of that charge, with the consequence that he weakened political resolve precisely when it was most needed.

Obviously, truth is in general to be preferred to fiction. But truths taken out of context, or made available to people who don’t know how to put them into context, can be as damaging as falsehoods and are likely to lead to

confusion, which in turn is likely to lead to acceptance of falsehoods.

As a philosopher, Socrates was obviously head and shoulders above his peers, but the day-to-day functioning of a society requires that some positions be uncritically accepted; and Socrates appears to have targeted those acceptances, with disastrous consequences for Athens, this being the real reason that he was executed.

# Why was Socrates Executed? Part II

Socrates wasn’t executed for corrupting the youth. He wasn’t executed for impiety. He wasn’t executed for “making the weaker argument the stronger.” These are fake charges. Everyone knows it. The truth is simpler, and more obvious.

Socrates wanted power.

He didn’t roam the city talking to farmers or carpenters or regular folk. He talked to generals. To high-born young men. To political players. That wasn’t an accident. That was a strategy. You don’t spend your life targeting power-adjacent elites unless you want something. And Socrates wanted something. He wanted to rule.

Not in the usual way. He wasn’t trying to climb the ladder. When offered official roles, he refused. But that isn’t a mark against the theory—it’s a mark in its favor. He didn’t want to be middle management in a broken regime. He didn’t want to be a servant of the state. He wanted to be the state.

His project was simple: install his worldview at the top. He groomed the men who might one day get there—Critias, Alcibiades, the rest. And he fed them a ready-made system: a moral theory, a political theory, an epistemology to back it all up. It wasn’t just talk. It was infrastructure. He was building a pipeline.

The ideal regime, in his view, would be ruled not by a soldier, or a priest, or a merchant—but by a philosopher. Not just any philosopher: someone like him. That’s the so-called “philosopher-king.” Not an abstract ideal. A mission statement.

And that’s why they killed him.

They didn’t kill him because he asked too many questions. They killed him because he was answering them—and those answers, if acted on, would’ve made him king. And other people wanted to be king. Or wanted to keep things kingless, so long as they stayed near the top.

Socrates wasn’t martyred for truth. He was eliminated for trying to win.

# Why was Socrates Executed? Part III

People say Socrates was executed for making people question the gods, the laws, the values of the city. But Athens was a liberal city. Questioning was allowed—celebrated, even. Sophists questioned the gods. Playwrights mocked them onstage. Nobody cared. Nobody was executed.

So that’s not it.

Some say he was executed because his teachings “laid the groundwork” for the oligarchic coups, especially the Thirty Tyrants. That’s closer to the truth—but the phrasing is wrong. He didn’t “lay groundwork.” He trained the men who tried to take over. Critias, Alcibiades, Charmides. These were his people. That’s not theoretical. That’s operational. He wasn’t an innocent thinker whose ideas were misused. He was assembling a team.

Others say he offended powerful people. Sure. But so what? So did everyone else. You don’t get executed for bruising egos. You get executed if the bruises come with a threat.

And Socrates was a threat.

He wasn’t just exposing ignorance. He was delegitimizing the authority of the people in charge, publicly, methodically. And he wasn’t doing it for sport. He had a replacement theory. A system. One where someone like him—someone who knows—should rule.

And he made that theory explicit: the philosopher should be king. Not the general. Not the priest. Not the man of wealth. The man of reason. The man who knows.

Not only did he say it—he built it. He trained young elites. He kept close to power. He stayed away from public office because he wasn’t interested in propping up the system. He wanted a different system. One where he would no longer be on the sidelines.

So they killed him.  
Not because he talked too much.  
Because he was aiming too high—and getting too close.

# The Meaning of Plato’s Cave Allegory

There are two ways to understand the Allegory of the Cave. On the one hand, it can be seen as putting forth a hypothesis concerning the structure of reality. On the other hand, it can be interpreted as an attempt to ‘red pill’ people about the structure of society.

Taken the first way, the Allegory of the Cave is saying that, although our senses give us raw data, intellect is needed to model this data appropriately and therefore to see the true structure of reality. Thus taken, this allegory has no political or social overtones and is merely a point about how the world is structured (*it consist of visible phenomena governed by underlying and therefore invisible laws*), along with an epistemological corollary (*in order to understand the world, it is not enough to observe it: we must also interpret those observations, and the intellect is therefore at least as much a source of knowledge as our senses)*.

Taken the second way, this allegory seems to be saying that members of society live propaganda-based lies. In this particular context, Plato does not tell us much about the nature of those lies. Indeed, it is not entirely clear that he is in fact discussing society. But his repeated use of terms like ‘prisoner’, ‘shackles’, and ‘blinded’ suggests as much. Other passages in the Republic make it clear that Plato was deeply distrustful of every stratum of society. He distrusted non-rulers, thinking them little more than animals; and he also distrusted rulers, mainly because, it seems, he himself was one and therefore knew firsthand how untrustworthy they could be.

# A One Page Proof of Plato’s Theory of Forms

Anything that exists in space-time is but an instance of something that does not so exist. This is the essence of Plato’s Theory of Forms. Consider some spherical object---a ball of some kind. (For expository reasons, suppose this object to be perfectly spherical.) This object, being spherical, is an 'instance' of the property--or, as Plato would say, the 'form'--of sphericity. Of course, this object is also an instance of innumerably many other properties (or 'forms'). Supposing that its mass is n, it is an instance of the property of having mass n; and supposing that its molecular structure is xyz, it is an instance of the property of having molecular structure xyz.

Plato's theory of forms is correct. The supposition that properties exist is necessary to validate even the most rudimentary inferences. Consider the inference from 'John and Bill are both tall’ to ‘there is something that John and Bill have in common.’ This inference obviously goes through, and it presupposes the existence of a property (namely, tallness), since the term ‘something’ in the second statement is obviously shorthand for ‘some property.’

Attempts have been made to replace statements about properties with statements about their instances, but such attempts inevitably fail. The statement 'one can have most of the properties of a great businessman without being a great businessman' cannot be translated into a statement that does not presuppose the existence of properties.

As for the idea that properties are identical with or composed of their instances, that too is a non-starter. For example, some have tried to identify the property of being a rock with a 'scattered object' consisting of all rocks. But this move fails, since even though that 'scattered object' is always undergoing changes (in, for example, the the location of its outer boundary), the property of being a rock does not undergo corresponding changes, which would not be possible if that property were identical with that object.

Analogous reasoning refutes any attempt to identify any property with any spatiotemporal entity.

Plato himself mischaracterized his own theory, by assuming that properties must in some way or other 'resemble' their own instances. And, of

course, if it is assumed that instances of properties must resemble property- instances, then various paradoxes will arise, including the Paradoxes discussed by Plato himself in his dialogue *the Parmenides.* But the very essence of Plato's theory is that properties, being non-spatiotemporal, do not relate to their instances in the way in which spatiotemporal entities relate to other spatiotemporal entities: they do not resemble them, they are not composed of them, and they do not causally interact.

To say that properties exist is simply to say that there are 'ways' things can be: being round is a way that a thing can be, and so is being green or red or male or female. Ways things can be are not spatiotemporal. A way that something can be is simply a possibility as to how it can be, and such a possibility obviously isn’t a constituent of space-time, even if the object in question is. So Plato's Theory of Forms is a demonstrably correct one.

Indeed, it is as much a truism as the assertion that a possibility as to how something can be is not a spatiotemporal entity.

# Plato’s Republic as Pol Potist Bureaucracy

For Plato, justice is identical with people staying in their ‘rightful place.’ (“To do one’s own business”, Plato writes, “is justice.” Plato has a very narrow and hierarchical conception of what a person’s ‘rightful place’ is. He believes that a person’s social position should be determined by his ‘nature.’ He further believes that one’s ‘nature’ cannot in any relevant respects change. “You are,” Plato writes, “all of you in this community, brothers. But when god fashioned you, he added gold in the composition of those of you who are qualified to be Rulers (which is why your prestige is greatest); he put silver in the Auxiliaries, and iron and bronze in the farmers and other workers.”

A corollary is that, for Plato, social strata should be rigidly defined, it being necessary that the barriers between them be virtually impenetrable. “If the non-ruling classes follow these rules,” Plato writes, “they will be safe

themselves and the saviors of the city; but whenever they come to possess lands, and houses, and money of their own, they will be householders and cultivators instead of guardians, and will become hostile masters of their fellow-citizens rather than their allies.”

Further, Plato doesn’t acknowledge the legitimacy of a person’s private life. For him, the entirety of a person’s life should be subordinate to the interests of the state. For example, marriages should be arranged. “We must arrange for marriage,” Plato writes, “and make it as sacred an affair as we can. And a sacred marriage is one that produces the most beneficial results.”

And people must never marry or reproduce with people outside of their social classes. “Guardians,” writes Plato, “must mate the best of our men with the best of our women as often as possible, and the inferior men with the inferior women as seldom as possible, and bring up only the offspring of the best.”

In Plato’s ‘ideal republic’, life is so micromanaged by the state that there is practically no such thing as private life. Every aspect of each citizen’s life must be in alignment with the interests of the state, and existence is completely collectivized. “Our men and women should be forbidden by law to live together in separate households,” Plato writes, “and all the women should be common to all the men; similarly, children should be held in common, and no parent should know its child, or child its parent.” Elsewhere Plato writes that: “They shall have no private property beyond the barest essentials. Second, none of them shall possess a dwelling-house or storehouse to which all have not the right of entry. Next, their food shall be provided by the other citizens as an agreed wage for the duties they perform…”

Plato correctly states that such a rigidly hierarchical social arrangement cannot be sustained unless the masses are kept ignorant and constantly lied to. “And no one but the rulers,” writes Plato, “must know what is happening, if we are to avoid dissension in our Guardian herd.”

So with respect to the question “To what extent does justice, in Plato’s view, depend upon the state lying to the citizenry?”, the answer is: Completely. Indeed, it depends on the state’s keeping its citizens ignorant and also in the resulting gaps in their knowledge being filled in with carefully constructed propaganda. Plato himself clearly states that the state must constantly subject its own citizenry to propaganda (pro-state lies) if the state is to remain intact and unified, it being Plato’s contention that nothing is

more important than unity and intactness of the state. “Is there anything worse for a state,” Plato asks, “than being split and fragmented, or anything better than cohesion and unity?”

Plato distinguishes between harmless and harmful state lies, claiming that the state has a duty to propagate the first and an equal duty to refrain from propagating the second. But is this distinction tenable?

No. The lies that, in Plato’s view, the state should require its citizens to accept are ones that the state must tell if it is to continue to enforce Plato’s conception of justice. According to that conception of justice, people do not have the right to listen to the kind of music they enjoy or marry the people they love or indeed do much of anything that they personally would like to do. Since such a restrictive conception of justice is false and evil, any lies that are told to uphold it are *ipso facto* evil, and there is therefore to principled distinction between good and evil lies in relation to such a conception.

Of course, the answer to this question is tautologously ‘yes’ *if* one accepts Plato’s conception of ‘justice.’ But this matters little, since, according to this conception, nobody is entitled to any freedoms of any kind, which means that it is evil and false.

# The Political Basis of Plato’s Epistemological Views

Plato’s epistemological views are to be understood in psychoanalytic or, alternately, sociological terms; and to a much lesser extent, the same is true of Descartes’ epistemological views. Exactly how these points are to be generalized is unclear, but it is clear that they do in fact generalize.

When Plato was writing, Athens was being wrenched apart by Civil War, and various passages in *The Republic* make it clear that Plato was profoundly worried: worried for his personal welfare and, to a lesser extent, for Athenian civilization. In that book, Plato, speaking through Socrates, makes it very clear that he self-identifies as an aristocrat and also that he very much wants to prevent existing class-distinctions from being disrupted. *The Republic* is supposedly an attempt to answer the question ‘what is justice?’, but it’s really an attempt to design an utterly stable, hierarchy-based society,

in which aristocrats are given their due and will not be ejected from power by the rabble. What is striking about *the Republic* is the degree of detail relating to class-distinctions, specifically to the designing and justifying of rules that severely limit interactions between classes: all done under the pretext of trying to design a ‘just’ society, the actual objective being to curb the dogs of revolution.

This is reflected in the particularly extreme form of rationalism embodied in Plato’s epistemological views. According to Plato, what our senses disclose to us is not real. What we observe (in other words, what we see, touch, feel, and so on) consists of ‘shadows’, as he puts it, and the realities that cast those shadows can be known only through pure thought.

All of which is totally absurd, of course. What could be more real than the rock that I hold in my hand, or the bird that I see, or the music that I hear, or the cool water that I drink? To be sure, all of these realities are ephemeral and are governed by unchanging laws that can be known only through inference, as opposed to direct observation. So it can and should be maintained that *some* aspects of reality are to be known through thought. But that is not what Plato is saying: he is saying that *nothing* ephemeral is real and, therefore, that nothing that can be observed is real. Plato is not saying that the changeable and the observable are only part of the story; he is saying that they are *none* of the story. Which is obviously false.

What is this about? Why did such an otherwise reasonable philosopher have such extreme and implausible views? The reason is that Plato is presenting *political* beliefs as *epistemological* beliefs. Plato is deeply afraid of political change. He wants Athens to stay the way it is. He does not want to lose his own power or status, let alone life or limb. Plato rightly believes *social* and *political* change to be a threat.

So he spurns it, claiming that it is all ‘unreal’—mere ‘shadows.’ In the *Republic,* Plato also links ‘the Good’ with ‘the real’: which makes no sense if taken literally, given that bedbugs and termites are as real as swans and elks, but which *does* make sense once it is seen that what Plato is talking about is not reality *per se*, but *society*. Obviously, reality comprises many bad things; rotten food is just as much a reality as fresh food; pain is just as real as pleasure. So the idea that bad things are ‘unreal’ is a non-starter.

But Plato is really speaking in code, and what he is saying makes perfect sense when decoded. The ‘good’--i.e. the ‘real’, as Plato puts it--is what conduces to social stability; and ‘the bad’---i.e. the ‘mere shadows’, in

Plato’s cave-allegory—are what threaten social stability. And a ‘just’ society is one in which the galley slaves labor away in their dungeon, where they belong, and the aristocrats sit on the deck of the ship and enjoy the view.

Plato’s epistemological views make little sense if taken as epistemological views, but they make plenty of sense if taken as attempts to rationalize his social position.

Descartes’ epistemological views, unlike Plato’s, are defensible on their own terms. Like Plato’s views, they are attempts to cope with social unrest. When Descartes was writing, advances in knowledge were quickly stripping the Catholic Church of all credibility. Science as we know it was just coming into existence at that time, and with every step that it took, some cornerstone of Church doctrine was turning out to be totally wrong. This had to have been an enormous source of anxiety for Europeans, Descartes included, given how thoroughly the Catholic Church had dominated every aspect of European life for the previous thousand years. The Church had provided certainties. Those certainties proved false. So Descartes took it upon himself to find new certainties. Just like Plato, he did epistemology to cope with threatening changes.

But there is a difference. Plato was a reactionary. He dealt with threatening changes by trying to thwart them, and his epistemology is correspondingly conservative. For Plato, it isn’t enough to see it or feel it or touch it. In order to be real, says Plato, the high priest of ‘the intellect’ has to give it his personal seal of approval. (Translation: before a social change can be allowed to occur, the aristocrats have to decide amongst themselves whether to let it occur.) Descartes, by contrast, is *anti-*reactionary. Descartes accepts the changes that are occurring, and he is looking for certainties *within* that new set of verities.

Interestingly, however, both Philosophers advocate particularly extreme forms of rationalism—meaning, in effect, that they overplay the role of thought in the acquisition of knowledge and underplay the role of observation. The reason for this, I would conjecture, is that both philosophers were uneasy about the changes in question—Descartes ambivalently so, and Plato unambivalently so--and responded with rationalism-driven skepticism about the reality of the observed. Notice that Plato celebrated the supposed unreality of the observable, in keeping with his complete antipathy towards the social changes in question, whereas Descartes attempted to overcome it, corresponding to his mixed feelings about those changes.

# Philosophy as Psychopathology

I wrote an audio-article in which I said that both OCD and philosophy were about retreating from the exigencies of external *actual* reality into the safety of internal pseudo-reality. And in keeping with this, I said that both OCD and philosophy are intellectualized impotence. I am obviously not the first to say this about philosophy. And I’m probably not even the first to say that it holds of *both* OCD and philosophy. But I am probably one of the first to say that what we are dealing with here is not a mere analogy but a veritable homology, in that, from a psychopathologist’s viewpoint, OCD and philosophy are cut from the very same cloth.

In any case, a listener of mine who goes by the name of L and H Productions, made the following point in response to my article. He said: “What about political philosophers? Don’t they engage the world? Aren’t they a counterexample to your contention that philosophy is about autistic non-engagement?”

Yes and no. Mostly no. Consider Plato, as he is a paradigm case of a political philosopher. Plato’s system was completely *a priori.* Yes—he was talking about how to reform the world. But really, that *isn’t* what he was doing. He was really talking about how to *replace* the world with a world of his own—a world that had little reality, and little justification, outside of his own thought-space. So Plato was really talking about replacing the actual world his thought-world. He wasn’t in any real way engaging the actual world.

And the absurdity of what Plato was doing comes out in a lot of ways: in, for example, the rigidity of the society that he was proposing; in the stereotyped—and in that respect decidedly OCD---protocols governing both education and, more generally, interactions between different people; and, moreover, in the absurd idea, put forth in his dialogue *The Laws*, that even the most minor violations of law should be punished by death; and, finally, in the incoherent idea that society should be ruled by a philosopher king— incoherent, because societies are to be run by sapient *doers*, not sapient *thinkers*--- by people who do not flee from the world into intellectual constructions---and are therefore *not* to be run by philosophers, granting, of course, that they are to be run by people who are philosopher-*like* to the

extent, but *only* to the extent, that they are intelligent.

Or consider Marx, another textbook case of a political philosopher.

Yes—he was talking about how to change the world. But really, he was talking, quite explicitly, about *destroying* the existing social structure and replacing it with one that had no real basis---other than a totally fabricated one---in reality, and which, when it was implemented, led to loss of life and opportunity on an unprecedented scale.

Not all political philosophers are as guilty as Marx and Plato of failing to engage actual political realities. Some political philosophers do not simply propose that existing political realities be replaced with their childish *a priori* fantasies.

For example, John Locke made a number of extremely reasonable points about law and economics that, when implemented, were enormously successful. And much the same is true, though in some respects to an even greater degree, of Adam Smith and David Hume, who, along with Locke, created the discipline of modern free-market economics.

But Adam Smith was really an ex-philosopher who left the discipline of philosophy in order to start a new discipline. And Locke and Hume were hard-core empiricists, their whole agenda as philosophers being to *empiricize* philosophy. Their criticism of existing philosophy was that it failed to engage the world, and their objective was to reinvent the discipline in such a way that it did engage the world.

So, yes, their political philosophies—which were very

good did engage the world; but to the extent that they did, they were almost *anti-*philosophical political philosophies.

That said, political theory can engage the world, and that does represent a limitation on the scope of my point about philosophy categorically being in the nature of an autistic withdrawal from reality.

But there is one last point to make, which does to some extent buttress my conception of philosophy as autistic retreat. Hume and Locke were arch- empiricists, meaning that, in their view, you don’t know it if you don’t have direct sensory evidence of it. Empiricism collapses into the view that we can have knowledge of nothing except our own conscious states; for the empiricist rejects all rules of inference that would enable us to posit the existence of *anything*, and we are therefore left unable to know anything that is not simply a datum of consciousness.

So in their attempt to make philosophy engage the world, Locke and

Hume empiricized philosophy. But in empiricizing philosophy, Locke and Hume made philosophy collapse into pure skepticism, pure skepticism being the most compete conceivable autistic withdrawal from reality into one’s own mind.