

No Other Choice

On the surface the tone of this title has a desperate air about it, of one's back up against the wall, like it's about to describe a do-or-die situation. This holds true in one important way that fails to register with most people. In fact, I don't even think it's in the record books but should be. I attribute the desperation at hand to a situation in which we're smack in the middle but blithely unaware of. I am referring to one of those critical points in history or perhaps better, human advancement, that's overlooked.

This almost willful blindness holds true even if someone got up and shouted aloud for all to see which is what this article is about. As for the word history and what it represents, I lean more towards the phrase "human advancement" because it evokes something more deeply rooted. This rootedness applies to us all both as members of the human race and is deeper than the cultures we're developed over the years. As for the subject at hand, I label it as the first and most important one of them all.

Hopefully the introductory paragraph is not overly dramatic. Nevertheless I put it this way because we've drifted away from our common Western heritage and have basically replaced it with interests which are far more transitory. These turn out to be distractions which prevent us from considering precise turning points that for the most part remain hidden from view by reason of their significance. Therefore I offer for consideration one of Plato's dialogues, the *Phaedo*. While rightly famous as an account of Socrates' last hours in prison before drinking the fateful hemlock, I have in mind another section. It's where he speaks of his "conversion" from potentially making a career of studying nature or *physis*¹ instead of philosophy. Therein lays the critical shift that reverberates down to the present day...small, yes tiny to the untrained eye but immensely huge.

¹ "It is at once apparent that we have no satisfactory rendering for *physis*. 'Primary substance' is charged with Aristotelian and scholastic associations; 'matter' suggests something contrasted with mind or life, whereas the primary meaning of *physis* is growth, and its first associations are of life and motion, not of stillness and death. From *Religion to Philosophy*, p. 7 by Frances Cornford.

I center upon this because it involves a wholesale shift in how we can approach life. On one hand, taking the scientific route involves a strenuous form of discipline aimed at understanding the world about us. Almost always it's followed by getting things done in accord with this understanding. On the other hand, the route taken by philosophy can become a highly enjoyable pursuit provided we know how we approach it. For example, I prefer the verb "do" over "read" because you don't read a dialogue like the *Phaedo*; instead, you "do" it or more precisely, you "be" the *Phaedo*. This intimacy escapes the customary scholarly approach we associate with such a pursuit. While that's an essential contribution, a text like the one at hand is for everyone. You "do" the text because your very life depends upon it.

In brief, the *Phaedo* recounts the last hours of Socrates in prison before he takes the hemlock. He's surrounded by close friends and launches into a discussion about where he is about to go, this in reference to death. He speaks in a nonchalant fashion that literally unnerves those attempting to console him. Judging by the way they comport themselves, you'd think these friends are the ones about to drink the hemlock, not Socrates. The can same apply to anyone "reading" the *Phaedo* instead of "being" it.

The account with regard to this seemingly casual approach to the end of life is something that grabs you and doesn't let you go. This had a direct albeit often unconscious effect on more recent articles on this homepage which run like chapters in an untitled book. Without being aware of it, I discovered that they were centering around the *Phaedo*. This didn't come about by choice but manifested itself gradually. Looking back, I can say that it was pure gift. The beauty of this dialogue is that it holds two apparently distinct things together. One is death and the other is, in a way, what brought Socrates to that point.

And that point is the shift from *phusis* to *philosophia*. It may be a bit far fetched, but could this interest early on in Socrates' life be a sign that already he has made the switch from physical life to physical death? That would be from the vantage point of an external observer. Or to put it more accurately, is it a switch from death-while-alive to life-while-dead? Perhaps that's where *phusis* and *philosophia* come together. Socrates' last words may be a way of putting this: "Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius." I.e., a cock was sacrificed to Asclepius by those who were ill hoping for a cure. Perhaps the cure is for those

who are physically dead but philosophically dead.

And so the challenge of narrowing down where Socrates transited from the study of nature, of *phusis*, to *philosophia* started to come into clearer focus. This transitus is like having climbed the world's tallest peak, the one by which all others are measured. Instead of facing the dreary prospect that what follows from here is less, suddenly new vistas opened up that previously were unimaginable. Armed with this insight, I found myself with plenty more waiting to be scaled.

One factor had bothered me until recently. Friends with whom I've shared insights about the *Phaedo* weren't especially keen about my interest. Rather, they were busy doing their own thing, all high class stuff from what I gathered. It made me wonder why I was stuck with this text written some 2,400 years ago while these good people were engaged in more contemporary interests. I expanded this observation out to contemporary culture which seems to have lost contact with its classical roots. That, of course, is a subject for another day, but one thing stands out. It happened with an astonishing rapidity...I guess one generation.

Getting back to the *Phaedo* or more specifically Socrates, I was struck by an observation most likely stemming from Frances Cornford who wrote two fine books back in the early twentieth century about Plato. He pinpointed something that had concerned me somewhat subconsciously for a long time, that is, at what point did Socrates get into or if you will, put his own unique stamp on *philosophia*²? Or to put it in slightly different terms, when did Socrates reach a plateau on which he both rested and continued to mature?

Fortunately for us the *Phaedo* documents Socrates' switch, if you like. He was enamored by the science of his day and pursued it. However, he rejected it because he felt there was a pressing need to look at the human condition or more precisely, what makes us happy and to live a moral life which feeds into this happiness. And so I went through the dialogue looking for relevant passages and

² I prefer the Greek spelling which consists of *philos* + *sophia*. The former as friend means you have a close but respectful relationship. That applies to *sophia* commonly rendered as wisdom. However, I like to broaden it out a bit to skill or technique.

found an abundance. As soon as I had picked out what fancied me, I put them down to mysteriously rest in them. I use that adverb deliberately, not in some kind of weird trance but simply as a means of expressing my enjoyment. This is a crucial step. You rest in the excerpts not so much on your own initiative but are compelled to do so as though these excerpts themselves had a life of their own inviting you to participate.

So after enjoying this blessed rest to the max I figured it was time to take a look at those excerpts which impressed me the most when it came to Socrates making the shift from *phusis* to *philosophia*. From what I gather, this was the most momentous move...let's say displacement...in Western Civilization. It isn't evident at first but stands out as such the more you realize what's involved. Actually what took place aeons ago is just as relevant as today. Again, a quote from Cornford's *Before and After Socrates* (pp. 16-17) hits the nail on the head as to the world view where *phusis* tends to dominate: "There is no longer a supernatural background..Intelligence is cut off from action. Thought is left confronting Nature, an impersonal world of things, indifferent to man's desire and existing in and for themselves. The detachment of self from the object is complete." Sounds like it was written yesterday.

Then he adds (much to everyone's relief) on p. 27 "Thus myth survived this contempt and needed reinterpretation. If man had begun by studying himself rather than external Nature, he would never have reached so fantastic a conclusion (soul as atomic particles)." This quote doesn't represent a kind of ostrich putting its head in the ground syndrome or hope that a former world will be restored. Rather, it can be taken as a gateway for Socrates and his shift to *philosophia*, of being a *philos* of *sophia*. This is in accord with Cornford's other book, *From Religion to Philosophy*.

Again, this shift today may cause some consternation and rightly so because principles and beliefs held so dearly are withering on the vine. Painful but perhaps necessary. However, when philosophy is proposed as coming after religion, it raises some eyebrows. This is due in part by the popular perception with regard to philosophy. What's involved here has nothing to do with that discipline commonly perceived. It's rooted in what had been stated above and incorporates two very elements dear to us all, being a friend and applying that friendship to a means...a technique à la *sophia*. That's as far as we dare to go

without moving into unknown territory while at the same time claiming we're familiar with it. Such familiarity...*philos...*is for the next generation (or two).

What follows comes from 97b through 100e of the Phaedo. In them are examples describing Socrates' *transitus* or shift from *phusis* to *philosophia*. The presentation with Greek words may come across as somewhat awkward. However, that's because I wish to get as close to Socrates' thinking as possible. Therefore please excuse the somewhat an unprofessional manner. The final excerpt is from the Theaetetus, a kind of after-thought. In many ways it sums up what went before.

Excerpts ³

One day I heard someone reading, as he said, from a book of Anaxagoras and saying that it is Mind that directs and is the cause of everything. I was delighted with this cause and it seemed to me good in a way that Mind should be the cause of all. I thought that if this were so, the directing Mind would direct everything and arrange each thing in the way that was best.

If we were to trace as far back as possible to that pivotal shift in the history of the West it starts here. It's the precise beginning where Socrates started to have doubts as to his current pursuits related to the science of his day. The anonymous person reading aloud from Anaxagoras is Our Hero, if you will. As with all heros deserving of that name, he is unknown. Not only that, he is completely unaware of it. Say, for example, we knew his identity, just that and nothing else. Such knowledge would take away the sense of mystery and reverberate down to the present day.

Perhaps this reading was in a public place, someone who was giving lessons while Socrates happened to stop by and stopped out curiosity. Sequentially speaking, Anaxagoras is the second but more immediate influence nevertheless dependent upon the reader who came later after him. So without knowing it, that person was responsible for starting the new human undertaking soon to be called philosophy.

What caught Socrates' attention with the fact that Anaxagoras, noted for his work in cosmology, claimed Mind as responsible for both directing and

³ From Plato Complete Works, edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1997).

causing everything. *Noos* is the noun in the sense of perceiving and thinking, that is, *diakosmeo* and *aitios*. The former has the preposition *dia-* or through prefaced to the verbal root *kosmeo* (to order, to arrange as well as to adorn) which makes the action more thorough and complete. Also it means to muster, array. The latter is an adjective with regard to a cause and showing responsibility for an act.

So this talk about *noos* stopped Socrates dead in his tracks. He was delight, *hedeomai* being a key word in the sense that he takes genuine pleasure with regard to something he had been looking for but hadn't yet discovered until now. If Anaxagoras maintained that *noos* directed and arranged all things in the best way possible, *kosmeo* and *tithemi*, chances are Socrates never would have made the transition from *phusis* to *philosophia*. The former is noted above and the latter as to set or to place which connotes permanency; *beltista* is the superlative of *agathos* or good.

If then one wished to know the cause of each thing, why it comes to be or perishes or exists, one had to find what was the best way for it to be or to be acted upon or to act.

Heurisko is the verb to know with regard to details about each and every thing, *hekastos* and *hope: apollumi, esti, beltistos, pascho* and *poieo* or to destroy, to be, best way to be, to suffer or to receive an impression and to make or to do.

I had found in Anaxagoras a teacher about the cause of things after my own heart.

Heurisko (as above) is the verb to find with regard to Anaxagoras being a *didaskalos* concerning the cause (*aitia*, also as motive) with regard to things (*periton onton*). I.e., Anaxagoras is a man after Socrates' own heart, *kata* or according to *noos* or mind.

I thought he would go on to explain the common good for all.

Oiomai to think as well as to deem or imagine with respect to *epekdiegeomai*. The prepositions *epi* and *ek* or upon and from are prefaced to the root *diegeomai* or to describe in full. The object is the good or *agathos* which is common, *koinos*.

This wonderful hope was dashed as I went on reading and saw that the man made no use of Mind nor gave it any responsibility for the management of things but mentioned as causes air and ether and water and many other strange things.

Elpis or hope is described as *thaumastos* also as marvelous. Unfortunately for Socrates he abandoned hope, *oxomai* as to depart. The reason which is key, a preliminary to shifting to *philosophia*? Anaxagoras made no use of mind, *noos* and *chraomai* also as to desire as well as to manage. Not only that, he failed to attribute to it responsibility for causing things to happen, *epaitiaomai* (*epi* or upon prefaced to the verbal root for *aitia* or cause). The verb *diakosmeo* is used with the noun *pragma*, generally as a business affair or as here, a thing. As for the verb, the preposition *dia-* or through prefaced to the verbal root *kosmeo* (to order, to arrange as well as to adorn). Instead of this, he puts forth absurdities or those things which are *atopos*, literally as having no place.

but he would neglect to mention the true causes.

A very short excerpt...part of a sentence...about Anaxagoras or more precisely, the study of nature. The key word here is *ameleo* or to have no care for with respect to causes which are true, *aitia* modified by *alethes* also as genuine.

Imagine not being able to distinguish the real cause from that without which the cause would not be able to act as a cause. It is what the majority appear to do, like people groping in the dark; they call it a cause, thus giving it a name that does not belong to it.

The key word here is *dierchomai* with the negative or literally not being able to go through or see to the end a genuine cause or *aitia* from that which wouldn't be able to act as such. Unfortunately most people think in this absurd way. That is, they go around as if there were no cause to anything in their lives. Indeed, the verb *pselaphao* or to touch or handle in the dark is accurate here.

What such people do is attribute an alien (*allogrios*) name instead of a cause, *aitia*. The verb for do this is *prosago* or to lead directly to. All this is an attempt to deny reality and come up with an ersatz form of it.

As for their capacity of being in the best place they could possibly be put, this

they do not look for nor do they believe it to have any divine force, but they believe that they will some time discover a stronger and more immortal Atlas to hold everything together more.

Here it's a case of both not looking for as well as not believing (*zeteo* and *oiomai* or to seek and to deem or to imagine) in the *dunamis* or capacity for being in the best possible place, the verb being *tithemai* or to set. Human events are not at issue but those which are divine. Unfortunately people fail to seek this, *zeteo*.

Also most people don't attribute to it any strength (*ischus* also as might) which is *daimonios*. That is to say, that which is not affected by a *daimon*, that operating between the human and the divine spheres. Instead, they put their faith in something that's stronger and endowed with greater immortality as is the case with Atlas, *ischuros* and *athanatos*. Supposedly this holds everything together in a better way, *sunecho* or to have with and *exeurisko*, to find out as well as to procure.

So I thought I must take refuge in discussions and investigate the truth of things by means of words.

Doxazo or to think as well as to hold an opinion with regard to taking refuge, the verb *pheugo* or to flee prefaced with the preposition *kata* also as down and intimating a more thorough concealment. This is in discussion or *logos*, word as expression. Also included is investigating the truth of things through words, *skopeo* also as to examine as well as to examine *aletheia*. This noun also means reality, the root being *lanthano* or to hide but with alpha privative, no concealment.

I am going to try to show you the kind of cause with which I have concerned myself. I turn back to those oft-mentioned things and proceed from them. I assume the existence of a Beautiful, itself by itself, of a Good and a Great and all the rest. If you grant me these and agree that they exist, I hope to show you the cause as a result, and to find the soul to be immortal.

Epideikumi or literally to show upon is remarkable insofar as it's a display of Socrates' life long concern, again keeping in mind that he is about to die. What is of issue for him is the form of cause (*eidos* also as shape with regard to *aitia* or cause), *pragmateuomai* also as to busy oneself. Such is the starting point

(*archo* also to begin) with all that he has discussed earlier.

Socrates presumes that the Beautiful exists in and by itself; the same with a Good and a Great. The verb here is *hupotithemi* or to put under concerning the *Kalon*, the *Agathon* and the *Mega*. If those with Socrates concur (*sugchoreo*, to come together, to meet) with his position, he hopes to show the cause (*epideiknumi* as above) and thus find the soul to be immortal (*psuche* as *athanatos*). The verb at hand is *aneurisko*.

What is Man? What actions and passions properly belong to human nature and distinguish it from all other beings? This is what he wants to know and concerns himself to investigate. You see what I mean, Theodorus, don't you? Theaetetus 174b

Here Socrates is at his best asking about those actions and passions belonging to human nature or *phusis* (the verbs *poieo* and *pascho* or to do or to make and to suffer, to receive an impression from without). Also, how does this *phusis* differ from all others, *proseko* and *diaphoros*, to hold to (*pros*) and different. *Zeteo* and *diereunao* or to seek and to track down thoroughly (*dia* or through) are the two intense actions involved. Socrates emphasizes this by pointedly asking Theodorus to concur with him, the verb being *manthano* also as to learn as well as to comprehend.

Can any conclusion be gotten from these excerpts? In a few other articles I had cited a statement by Carl Jung who declares literally that "the psyche is real." From what I gather, that means everything we, the ones who doing the experiencing, are actively...not passively...participating in reality. We tend to think of reality in terms of that which is out there apart from ourselves, the supposed real world as has been described above, *phusis* or nature. Not so with the psyche. Though it has no problem with *phusis*, the psyche prefers to take the same route as Socrates and become a *philos* of *sophia*. Admittedly this is rare; always was and always will be yet is enough to keep the world from imploding.

Also the excerpts from the *Phaedo* and one from *Theaetetus* show that perennial human tendency to put distance between *Noos* or Mind as Socrates puts it and our everyday lives. We do make efforts to subscribe to it such as performing religious rituals, studying religions topics and the like. Thrown into

this mix, of course, is action, helping people out in their need. All well and good. However, a deeper look reveals that while the intent may be good, the heart is empty. Hence it goes contrary to Jung's observation, so simple on the surface. That seems to be why most people subscribe to the dictum that the psyche is not real.

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