

## The Socratic Hero

A long time ago a man in Greece was sentenced to death on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth. He warned those who sentenced him that they would regret their actions. Regret them they would, for when the court at Athens sentenced Socrates to death, they passed judgment upon one of the greatest philosophers in history. Socrates was a man unlike no other before him, not only as a philosopher but as a moral hero – *the* moral hero. Socrates laid many of the foundations for the future of Western civilization, and he has stood the test of time better than perhaps any person in the history of morality. In understanding Socrates, an archetype of the moral hero, it may be hoped that we can better understand what it is that we seek in morality, and how we can improve both ourselves and society through learning from past example.

The story of Socrates' mission and way of life is described succinctly in Plato's *Apology*, where Socrates finds himself on trial for the charges that would eventually get him the death sentence, and where he attempts to defend himself and his life's mission. It starts, he tells us, with an oracle. The oracle at Delphi claimed that no man was wiser than Socrates, something Socrates found to be most unusual. "How can no man be wiser than I?" he asks himself. "I don't claim to be the smartest man there is, and certainly there are many others who are held by the people to be wiser than I." Pondering this, he sets out to find the man who can prove the oracle false. First he finds a politician reputed wise by many and talks with him to determine how wise he is. Yet upon asking about his knowledge and its foundations, Socrates finds that this man is not really as wise as he claims, even though the politician is quite certain of his own greatness. Surely this is not a wiser man than I, Socrates concludes, for he does not even see his own errors! Socrates goes off to another wise man and does the same thing, asking what he knows and how he knows those things. "And so I go about the world, obedient to the god (of the

oracle), and search and make enquiry into the wisdom of anyone, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise . . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Here is someone willing to challenge the “wise men” of his time without so much as a second thought. These days we see debates and arguments on television and like to believe that challenging someone’s claims is easy but, to be a member of society challenging the leaders and powerful people of that society, to challenge a culture’s most basic beliefs and assumptions, and to do so alone, is no small task. Socrates looked upon the world of his time and without reservation asked, “Is this the way it should be?” He did not settle for the fact that everyone else thought so, that important people said so, or that it would be safer for him to not ask. It is this kind of courage in pursuing honesty and truth that allows men and women to stand in the fight against the moral outrages of their own times. In the times when slavery was a simple fact of life in many Southern states, a Socratic man would not simply let it be that slavery was the case; he would have to know *why* it is this way, and whether it should be. It is challenges like those that begin the great moral movements in history – challenges from someone like Socrates, the famous “gadfly” of Athens, whose thought is not restricted by the rules and taboos of a society. Any person who is to create real change must be a gadfly of his or her times, for anything less the status quo will simply brush aside. One must be willing to stand up and shout “No!” when he or she sees wrong, be it in the form of ignorance or injustice, both of which Socrates spent his life fighting against.

There is another value visible in the start of Socrates’ quest, and that is the point of his departure. Socrates is famous for having said that he only knew that he knew nothing, and yet the oracle said that it was Socrates who was the wisest of men. How can this be? After Socrates

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Apology* 23b

had spoken with his first “wise man” and sought the foundations of his wisdom, finding nothing, he concluded that “Although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is, for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows; I neither know nor think that I know.”<sup>2</sup> Socrates is not claiming to be stupid. What he is doing is choosing to take nothing for granted. For when one wants to find a true ground for morality and justice, Socrates might tell us, one must not only challenge the wisdom of others, but must also challenge one’s self. We must reflect upon our own beliefs, why we have them, and whether they really seem to be beliefs that stand up to scrutiny. Socrates in doing this starts from the very beginning, challenging everything he thought he knew. What he comes to discover as he questions the wise men is that, while they claim to be wise in their own right, they never stop to ask where their so-called wisdom come from. They lack the virtue of self-reflection, the ability to see themselves in an honest light and challenge their own actions. Socrates can do this, and it is a skill we should all seek to perfect. This is also not to say, however, that no one knows anything and that we should simply be relativists, for what Socrates was trying to do in challenging these men and revealing their folly was to point people in the right direction, one which would lead to true knowledge.

What is this direction? What is the goal of Socrates? “I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons or your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul.”<sup>3</sup> For Socrates it is not the value of material things or fame and social status that are important, but who we are as people. It is the ‘soul’, the conscience, one’s moral and spiritual self that is the end goal of Socrates’ quest. As Americans today we spend so much time watching things fly by at light

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<sup>2</sup> Apology 21d

<sup>3</sup> Apology 30a

speed that sometimes we forget that humanity is involved somewhere in there. We see thirty second clips on the news, a commentator ranting about immigrants or terrorists or a political party, and then we go off to our day jobs without another thought. But these flashes of information that fill our consciousness start to stick, and if we're not careful we start to develop a misinformed view of the world. To counter this we must sometimes stand back and reflect on ourselves and what we believe, even if it interrupts our daily schedule. Sometimes we have to question our goals and whether they are really worth it. Sometimes we have to ask, "How does this affect me as a person?" Thus we must look to ourselves, to those close to us, and to everyone we encounter and wonder, "Does this person know what his or her goals are? Has this person considered his or her own beliefs and what they mean lately? What drives this person?" For a society that takes time to weigh its own goals and aspirations is a society that can determine the path it wants its future to take, and is thereby a society with the power to change itself for the better.

The city-state of Athens, however, was not ready for the reflection that Socrates sought, and so it placed him on trial. Moral heroes, however, are not deterred by the reactions of unreflective men and women. Socrates stood before the court with his life on the line and did not for a moment falter. "While I have life and strength," he says before the assembly set to judge him, "I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy . . . Wherefore, men of Athens, I say to you: do as Anytus (one of Socrates' accusers) bids or not as Anytus bids, and either acquit me or not; whichever you do, understand that I shall never alter my ways, not even if I have to die many times."<sup>4</sup> Some might see this as stubborn and foolish. For Socrates, however, it was a matter of principle, of fighting for his goals of searching for truth and cultivating of the soul, and no threat would make him waver. For even when people fight back

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<sup>4</sup> Apology, 29d-30c

against their challengers, as our own country experienced when members of society fought the reforms of the Civil Rights era, that must not cause one to halt for a moment from a just cause. Whenever a ruling or action comes up that violates the principles of justice, the actions of a moral hero are the same: “I made up my mind that I would run the risk, having law and justice with me, rather than take part in your injustice because I feared imprisonment and death.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Socrates claimed to live all his life as he lived the hour of his judgment: “I have been always the same in all my actions, public as well as private, and never have I yielded any base compliance to those who are slanderously termed my disciples, or to any other.”<sup>6</sup> And knowing Socrates, the man who would talk to all people be they men or women, free or slaves, and ask them what they thought about virtue and whether they were in pursuit of their own enrichment, we can easily believe it.

Perhaps it was because he angered too many powerful men. Perhaps it was because he was unwilling to appeal to the Assembly for mercy by using his wife and children (“I would rather die having spoken after my manner, than live speaking in yours.”<sup>7</sup>) Whatever the exact reason, Socrates was found guilty of the charges of corrupting the youth and impiety and sentenced to death. He accepted the penalty and waited out his time, refusing any offers of escape and drinking the poisonous hemlock without a moment’s hesitation. He lived like he died, with no fear of temporary consequences or of what others thought. And with him died perhaps the greatest moral hero the world has ever seen.

This is the portrait of Socrates: a man in search of the truth, unwilling to be satisfied by the assurances of his age or his prior beliefs, not intimidated by the anger or challenges of others, absolutely unwavering in his devotion to principles of justice even to the end. When a person

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<sup>5</sup> Apology, 32b-32c

<sup>6</sup> Apology, 32e

<sup>7</sup> Apology, 39d

like this appears, no matter what the time or the place, he or she will have an impact, for the Socratic hero is willing to stand head and shoulders above the beliefs of the times and seek something that can be held by all people to be just and worth believing in. This is one who is not distracted by the images and fads of the moment or by personal gain, one who looks to all walks of life and all situations to find something that can be believed in. And with this person, the Socratic hero, we find someone whom we can all strive to emulate if we seek to make the world a better one.