

SOCRATES

IMPOVERISHED AND ENRICHED

Roger Lipsey

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In this chapter from his retelling of several ancient encounters with Delphi, Roger Lipsey considers the relationship between the Oracle at Delphi and one of its most famous partisans, Socrates, and the impact it had on his life, and continues to have for us today.

I think of Socrates as more than a man, much as the followers of Pythagoras used to say of their teacher that there are three kinds of biped—human beings, birds, “and a third thing.”¹ One can almost see them pointing surreptitiously toward the odd person—the third thing—who had changed their lives. The key Delphic narratives are a long passage from Socrates’ defense before the people of Athens and the saga of King Croesus.

The first is modest in scope and intimate in means: Socrates scarcely leaves the city, and he does nothing more than engage his fellow men in conversation. The second is on quite another scale: it involves world-historical events, the movement of great armies across Asia, the rise and fall of empires. Yet as the saga of Croesus unfolds, it becomes little less

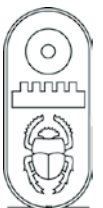
personal and inward than Socrates’ defense. We are offered not just the colorful portrait of a cunning ruler but the psychological drama of his conversion from arrogance to another condition of mind and heart, schooled by the oracle and by circumstance, humbled but now wise, genuinely touching in his humanity. This chapter and the next explore these great narratives.

Socrates was brought before an Athenian jury in the year 399 B.C.E. on charges of introducing strange gods into Athens and corrupting the youth of the city. The jury that he faced in his effort not so much to acquit himself as to unveil his motives in a valedictory statement, was nothing like the “twelve men strong and true” of American courtroom tradition; it was composed of some six hundred male citizens, among whom the strong and true were surely outnumbered.

As reconstructed with magnificent art by Plato, the passage in Socrates’ defense that bears on Delphi does not directly address



Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*, 1787.



the formal charges against him but speaks to what he took to be the real complaint: he had repeatedly humiliated the citizens of Athens through probing conversations that left them feeling foolish, uncertain, reduced.

Socrates' narrative begins with his report of a message from the Delphic oracle that he had not personally sought but could not ignore when it was made known to him. He speaks familiarly, as if without style, but one is riveted by his words at every new reading.

Plato's version of Socrates' defense, like the Book of Ecclesiastes and a handful of other ancient texts, addresses us with a simple eloquence that makes so much else seem overdressed—as if literature is essentially conversation, and the best of it, no matter how grand in theme, retains that flavor.²

Socrates' Call

"I have gained [my] reputation, gentlemen, from nothing more or less than a kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom do I mean? Human wisdom, I suppose. It seems that I really am wise in this limited sense Now, gentlemen, please do not interrupt me if I seem to make an extravagant claim, for what I am going to tell you is not my own opinion. I am going to refer you to an unimpeachable authority. I shall call as witness to my wisdom, such as it is, the god at Delphi.

"You know Chaerophon, of course. He was a friend of mine from boyhood And you know what he was like, how enthusiastic he was over anything that he had once undertaken. Well, one day he actually went to Delphi and asked this question of the god—as I said before, gentlemen, please do not interrupt—he asked whether there was anyone wiser than myself. The priestess replied that there was no one. As Chaerophon is dead, the evidence for my statement will be supplied by his brother, who is here in court.

I think of Socrates
as more than a man, much as
the followers of Pythagoras
used to say of their teacher
that there are three kinds
of biped—
human beings, birds,
“and a third thing.”

“Please consider my object in telling you this. I want to explain to you how the attack upon my reputation first started. When I heard about the oracle's answer, I said to myself, What does the god mean? Why does he not use plain language? I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small. So what can he mean by asserting that I am the wisest man in the world? He cannot be telling a lie, that would not be right for him.

“After puzzling about it for some time, I set myself at last with considerable reluctance to check the truth of it in the following way.

“I went to interview a man with a high reputation for wisdom, because I felt that here if anywhere I should succeed in disproving the oracle and pointing out to my divine authority, You said that I was the wisest of men, but here is a man who is wiser than I am.

“Well, I gave a thorough examination to this person—I need not mention his name, but it was one of our politicians that I was studying when I had this experience—and in conversation with him I formed the impression that although in many people's opinions, and especially in his own, he appeared to be wise, in fact he was not.

“Then when I began to try to show him that he only thought he was wise and was not really so, my efforts were resented both by him and by many of the other people present. However, I reflected as I walked away, Well, I am certainly wiser than this man. It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of, but he thinks that he knows something which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate it seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.

“After this I went on to interview a man with an even greater reputation for wisdom, and I formed the same impression again, and here too I incurred the resentment of the man himself and a number of others.

“From that time on I interviewed one person after another. I realized with distress and alarm that I was making myself unpopular, but I felt compelled to put my religious duty first. Since I was trying to find out the meaning of the oracle, I was bound to interview everyone who had a reputation for knowledge.

“And . . . gentlemen, for I must be frank with you, my honest impression was this. It seemed to me, as I pursued my

investigation at the god’s command, that the people with the greatest reputations were almost entirely deficient, while others who were supposed to be their inferiors were much better qualified in practical intelligence.

“I want you to think of my adventures as a sort of pilgrimage undertaken to establish the truth of the oracle once for all. After I had finished with the politicians I turned to the poets, dramatic, lyric, and all the rest, in the belief that here I should expose myself as a comparative ignoramus. I used to pick up what I thought were some of their most perfect works and question them closely about the meaning of what they had written, in the hope of incidentally enlarging my own knowledge.

“Well, gentlemen, I hesitate to tell you the truth, but it must be told. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that any of the bystanders could have explained those poems better than their actual authors. So I soon made up my mind about the poets too. I decided that it was not wisdom that enabled them to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration, such as you find in seers and prophets who deliver all their sublime messages without knowing in the least what they mean.

“It seemed clear to me that the poets were in much the same case, and I also



Reconstructed columns at the Temple of Apollo.
Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.



observed that the very fact that they were poets made them think that they had a perfect understanding of all other subjects, of which they were totally ignorant. So I left that line of inquiry too with the same sense of advantage that I had felt in the case of the politicians.

“Last of all I turned to the skilled craftsmen. I knew quite well that I had practically no technical qualifications myself, and I was sure that I should find them full of impressive knowledge. In this I was not disappointed. They understood things which I did not, and to that extent they were wiser than I was.

“But, gentlemen, these professional experts seemed to share the same failing which I had noticed in the poets. I mean that on the strength of their technical proficiency they claimed a perfect understanding of every other subject, however important, and I felt that this error more than outweighed their positive wisdom.

“So I made myself spokesman for the oracle, and asked myself whether I would rather be as I was—neither wise with their wisdom nor stupid with their stupidity—or possess both qualities as they did. I replied through myself to the oracle that it was best for me to be as I was.

“The effect of these investigations of mine, gentlemen, has been to arouse against me a great deal of hostility, and hostility of a particularly bitter and persistent kind, which has resulted in various malicious suggestions, including the description of me as a professor of wisdom.

“This is due to the fact that whenever I succeed in disproving another person’s claim to wisdom in a given subject, the bystanders assume that I know everything about that subject myself. But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is

his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless.

“That is why I still go about seeking and searching in obedience to the divine command, if I think that anyone is wise, whether citizen or stranger, and when I think that any person is not wise, I try to help the cause of God by proving that he is not. This occupation has kept me too busy to do much either in politics or in my own affairs. In fact, my service to the God has reduced me to extreme poverty.”

Socrates speaks mightily for himself, with clarity that requires no interpretation, but it is often by searching back through a text—by holding it directly in our hands, so to speak, and sensing its texture—that we can best grasp its meaning.

For example, we have discussed in general and observed in Delphic tales that the oracle’s message is often enigmatic to the one for whom it is intended: he must interpret and act on the message in such a way that it yields fruit, not destruction.

Even great Socrates was not exempt from confusion when confronted with “his” Delphic message. “When I heard about the oracle’s answer, I said to myself, What does the god mean? Why does he not use plain language?”

Of course, the language *was* plain, nothing like the high-flown verse we have already come across in some tales. But in another sense, Socrates was right: its meaning was anything but plain and necessarily prompted him “to puzzle about it for some time.” He began, in other words, to work toward an interpretation.

His first act, as an interpreter of Delphi, was to eliminate the possibility that the

oracle was lying. He did so really as a person of faith: “[The god] cannot be telling a lie, that would not be right for him.” However, this assent put Socrates in a difficult position; he could not bring himself to agree with such an outrageous statement about his own person, nor could he deny that the oracle spoke the truth.

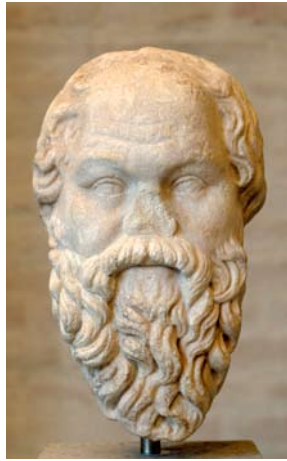
To resolve the dilemma, one side or the other had to give a little. Thus, Socrates decided “with considerable reluctance” to put the truth of the oracle’s words to the test. It is impossible to judge whether his reluctance had to do with the audacity of questioning the oracle’s truthfulness or with an intimation of the difficulties that lay ahead.

Socrates’ Interview Technique

Whichever it was—perhaps both—his initial program to check the truth of the oracle was not especially ambitious. He decided to interview just one well-chosen individual who was widely admired for wisdom. If Socrates could establish to his own satisfaction that this fellow was wiser than himself, he would in one stroke eliminate a literal interpretation of the oracle’s words.

Briefly drawing on his consummate sense of theater, Socrates mimed for his audience the exchange that he had hoped to have, virtually man to man, with the “divine authority” at Delphi in which he would “point out” with tutorial pleasure that the message praising his wisdom had, after all, been mistaken.

Socrates goes on, with a studied naiveté that surely fooled no one, to recount that the political leader he had chosen for this experiment unfortunately proved to be unwise, “although in many people’s opinion, and especially his own, he appeared to be wise.”



Head of Socrates. Roman copy after a Greek original by Lysipp (ca. 320 BCE). Glyptothek Museum, Munich. Photo by Bibi Saint-Pol.

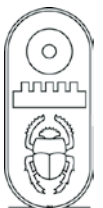
And when Socrates tried to show him the true state of affairs, not only the man himself, but also witnesses to the conversation became upset. In another writing, Plato vividly describes the difficulty of conversations with Socrates, of which this was the first, in the years after he received the message from Delphi:

“Anyone who is close to Socrates and enters into conversation with him is liable to be drawn into an argument, and whatever subject he may start, he will be continually carried round and round by him, until at last he finds that he has to give an account both of his present and his past life, and when he is once entangled, Socrates will not let him go until he has completely and thoroughly sifted him.”³

This sifting was, for many, a powerfully unpleasant experience. Continuing his recitation, Socrates described himself as walking away from this first effort to resolve his problem and muttering that he was clearly wiser than the politician “to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.”

Here entered Western thought, with touching modesty, the concept of unknowing. Expressed earlier by Heraclitus in a grand abstraction,⁴ it now comes fully to life in the person of a man no longer young, muttering.

He decided to try again, by interviewing “a man with an even greater reputation for wisdom,” and of course he was again disappointed and aware of the irritation of bystanders witnessing the conversation. At this point Socrates’ preliminary efforts to resolve his dilemma blossomed into a full-blown program constrained by no particular limits. “From that time on I interviewed one person after another.” He realized “with distress and alarm” that he was seriously



offending people, but he had come to regard these conversations as his “religious duty,” a “sort of pilgrimage” undertaken “at the god’s command.”

In truth, this bold idea of pilgrimage and religious duty represents his second interpretation of the Delphic message and a way of acting on it that someone else might not have conceived. Delphi had said nothing about launching a philosophical project among the people of Athens and with distinguished visitors whom he felt drawn to sift—or had all this, after all, been implied?

“Since I was trying to find out the meaning of the oracle, I had to interview everyone who had a reputation for knowledge.” There is no clearer example of *completing the oracle* through interpretations and actions that bear one’s own stamp and serve to intensify either strengths or weaknesses.

Socrates started at the top of society, according to his account, and worked his way down the ladder of prestige by first interviewing political leaders, then poets and playwrights, then craftsmen. One result of structuring his investigation in this way was to turn his perception of the social hierarchy upside down: he found that “the people with the greatest reputations were almost entirely deficient, while others who were supposed to be their inferiors were much better qualified.”

But the situation among artists and craftsmen was scarcely more satisfactory. As evoked more fully in Plato’s short dialogue, *Ion*, Socrates discovered that the poets and playwrights must have composed their works in a state of inspiration much like that of a prophet or seer because later, by the clear light of day, they proved unable to “explain” their works—and, like the politicians, were conceited enough to think that they understood “all other subjects,” although Socrates satisfied himself that this was not in the least true.

Among craftsmen, Socrates found impressive technical knowledge but, again,

the erroneous assumption that their technical knowledge fitted them to “claim a perfect understanding of every other subject.” “I felt that this error more than outweighed their positive wisdom.”

Having illuminated all this for the jurors, Socrates then reported a daring moment of role play that conveys an almost inexpressible trait of his character: a blend of humor, detachment, and relaxed intimacy with the divine. “So I made myself spokesman for the oracle, and asked myself whether I would rather be as I was—neither wise with their wisdom nor stupid with their stupidity—or possess both qualities as they did. I replied through myself to the oracle that it was best for me to be as I was.”

One is tempted to imagine Socrates rushing from chair to chair to carry out this conversation between himself as a solemn temple official and himself as Socrates “replying through himself,” in the manner of an oracle, in response to the oracle. What an irrepressible mind, playing deliciously when his life hung in the balance.

Socrates’ account of his relation with Delphi and its impact on him was now moving toward conclusion—and, curiously enough, he concluded with two fresh interpretations of the Delphic message that had set so much in motion.

“The truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, “The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless.” Through this interpretation, Socrates distanced the message and shucked the burden of taking it personally. Even the message itself he now described as addressed to “us” rather than to himself.

But that is not quite the end. He went on to describe himself as permanently

engaged in trying “to help the cause of God” by unmasking those who pass for wise in society but are not so. “That is why I still go about seeking and searching in obedience to the divine command.”

The oracle’s message may have been depersonalized, but Socrates’ service to “the cause of God” called for total engagement of his person, even to the point of courting death at trial by apologizing for nothing and, instead, insisting on the piety and goodness of his enterprise. Helping the cause of God represented the final interpretation and action called forth by the Delphic message.

Readers who turn back to the full text of the defense and to the *Phaedo*, Plato’s account of Socrates’ last hours, may experience—for the first time or again—that a space hollows out inside where something of Socrates thereafter dwells; soon forgotten, of course, but not altogether. One becomes, if only a little and from time to time, “of the party of Socrates.”

And Socrates was of the party of the Delphic oracle. One could argue that Socrates’ professed dedication was merely or mainly a ruse to legitimize, in the eyes of his conventionally pious fellow citizens, the philosophical project in which he would

in any event have engaged. But his tone throughout the defense argues otherwise.

As in the Bible, the prophet is called into action, he does not call himself; and he is sustained in his prophetic task by a sense of intimacy with the divine source that first summoned him and now oversees his fulfillment of the task. That great irrational temple at Delphi was Socrates’ partner in bringing to his community, and thereafter to all, a special sort of rationality—relentlessly logical, filled with goodness, ready at the appropriate moment to yield to prayer or silence.⁵

Endnotes

1. Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras*, chap. 28, 76.
2. The translation that follows, by Hugh Tredennick, will be found in Hamilton/Cairns, *Socrates’ Defense (Apology)*, 20D-23C.
3. Plato, *Laches*, 188A, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *The Collected Dialogues*, Hamilton/Cairns.
4. “You could not discover the limits of soul even if you traveled every road to do; such is the depth of its meaning.” Wheelwright, *Heraclitus*, fr. 42, p. 58. For discussion, see Roger Lipsey, *Have You Been to Delphi?* SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), chap. 12.
5. Lipsey, *Have You Been to Delphi?* chap. 5, 87-94.

