

THE TRICORN

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Socrates: Innocent Or Guilty?

Over the past two or three decades, I.F. Stone earned a reputation as one of the most remarkable journalists of our times. He probed into corners unexplored by others, and may well be regarded as the father of investigative reporting. An iconoclast and myth-breaker, his writings have been quoted all over the world. Last year, on his 70th birthday, he retired. Scholar that he has always been, he plunged into one of his lifelong joys, the study of ancient Greece. In a "self-interview" article in the New York Times of last April, he opened some long-locked doors concerning Socrates-- and especially Socrates' famous trial for his life as detailed by Plato in "The Apology" (in Greek, meaning defense).

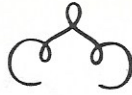
The following is a condensation of the self-interview:

This trial, next to that of Jesus, rates as the foremost classic in history, and has long been one of the most discussed readings in the Great Books program. The trial, held in 399 B.C., some 2,400 years ago, was conducted before a jury of more than 500 of Socrates' peers. As is well known, Socrates, then 70, was charged on two counts: (1) violating the law by "refusing to do reverence to the gods recognized by Athens, and introducing other new divinities, " and (2) "corrupting the youth." In Plato's work we are never told precisely what these laws were on which the charges were based, nor the specific allegations.

As Plato depicts the trial, it is the virtuous Socrates against his enemies, a clear-cut case of good versus evil, freedom and democracy against tyranny and political revenge. The world has always believed this version, and hence Socrates has for centuries stood as a monument and model of righteousness and impeccable virtue, the universal paradigm of human rights.

Stone now pounds some cracks in this long-impenetrable wall. The accepted tradition begins to suffer a few tremors. He charges that not only were Socrates' judges justified in their charges and verdict, but that Plato himself was guilty of serious moral shortcomings -- of what today might be called "concealing evidence" that distorted the truth. We might be puzzled by one thing. Socrates taught in Athens much of his life, unmolested. Why, then did his accusers wait until he was 70 to bring charges and demand his death? Stone has answers.

What Stone was able to uncover about Socrates and his times and trial remained concealed to the scores of scholars who had so thoroughly combed this event in history. Stone, a meticulous and experienced investigator probed a few untouched corners and found tiny nests of virgin facts. First, Plato, the narrator of the trial and an ardent admirer of Socrates, was a fervent elitist, an autocrat



who despised democracy and rule by rabble or commoners. This is made dramatically clear in "The Republic," his blueprint for the ideal government run by elitist administrators. From his view, it was important that he show the failures of justice and democracy when placed in the hands of the people or their elected representatives.

So Plato turned the trial of Socrates into a trial of Athens and of democracy. He used it, according to Stone, to demonstrate that the common people were too ignorant, benighted and fickle to entrust with political and judicial power. Actually, the only two recorded sources of that trial are Plato and Xenophon, both anxious to put their beloved master in as favorable a light as possible. But neither gives us an actual transcript of the trial, but rather only what Socrates said, of what, in their own view, they think he should have said in his own defense. From neither do we have anything from the prosecution's side. In short, from these two historical sources we get a one-sided argument. Because of the natural bias of Plato and Xenophon, we can surmise that much of the damaging evidence against Socrates was deliberately not brought to light.

Socrates evades the charge that he did not respect the city's gods, as was the law, and proves instead that he is not an atheist, something he was not charged with. And we never do learn in some clarifying detail what was meant by the charge of "corrupting the youth." Rather, history, via Plato, tells us only that Socrates was condemned simply because he'd spent his life exhorting his fellow citizens to be virtuous. Stone believes the case against Socrates was political and that the charge of corrupting the youth was based on a belief and considerable evidence that he was deliberately undermining their faith in Athenian democracy.

Now comes some significant background on Socrates himself. According to Stone, Socrates was no lover of democracy. He, too, was an elitist who preferred government by an intellectual brain trust, by wise and virtue-laden administrators and not drawn from the common layers of society. This message was the mission of his years of teaching to his many students, but cloaked in the admirable garment of "rule by virtue."

Perhaps Socrates' most famous student was Critias, the bloodiest dictator and tyrant Athens had ever known. He was the leader of the ruthless revolutions that occurred in 411 and 404 B. C., a few years prior to Socrates' trial -- short-lived but devastating reigns that temporarily wiped out every semblance of Athenian democracy, which slaughtered one-tenth of the population, sent thousands of others to prisons and expropriated property. It became a true reign of terror, while all or most of the prominent men of Athens were imprisoned or exiled and their property taken from them -- Socrates remained one of the untouchables, free to continue his teachings.

Thus, a few years later, the tyrants defeated and expelled, Socrates came to trial with this political stigma surrounding him. He was the teacher of Critias. Critias was marked everywhere as corrupt. Was this part of the charge of Socrates' accusers that he had "corrupted the youth" of Athens? Was there now a natural and justifiable prejudice against Socrates? Was Socrates indirectly responsible, through Critias and his fellow tyrants, for the execution of 1,500 Athenians and the banishment of another 5,000, a tenth of the population during the reign of terror? Was he indirectly responsible for the eviction of all the leading voices of democracy? In the Apology, Plato calls Socrates "the gadfly" of Athens. But where was Socrates' sting when Athens needed it most?



Plato never mentions Critias nor even the very recent antidemocratic revolution and the rule of the tyrants. Instead, Plato has Socrates represent himself as a man above the battle of politics. In fact, nowhere in the ancient texts do we find Socrates resisting or deploring the overthrow of democracy, nor welcoming its restoration after Critias was defeated and expelled. The dictatorship of the Thirty Tyrants was the dictatorship of the wealthy landed aristocracy to which both Plato and Critias belonged. And this was the very social circle from which most of Socrates' followers and students were drawn. Few admirers of Plato and Socrates give full recognition or significance to this, especially as it relates to Socrates' trial.

Socrates had an "accuser" who brought the charges, though Plato never cites him by name. However, as Stone's studies show, the accuser was simply one person selected by a large body of accusers to be the "official" accuser, as was the law of custom of the time. Thus Socrates was brought to trial not by a few spiteful persons or personal enemies. There was a kind of mass hostility toward him because of his teachings, his past association with Critias and his group, and the preferential treatment given him by Critias during the time of tyranny.

Xenophon, less famous but perhaps more honest than Plato, stated in his "Memorabilia" that "the accuser" said Socrates "taught his pupils to look down upon the established laws" by deriding the egalitarian method of filling many minor offices in Athens by lot, and by teaching them that government should be left to experts instead of being determined by popular debate and vote in the assembly. How remarkably close this is to the plan laid down by Plato himself in the Republic. Did Plato develop this idea from Socrates' teachings earlier?

In Xenophon's own history of his time he quotes the accuser as declaring that "none wrought so many evils" to the city of Athens as Critias and Alcibiades, the two most famous pupils of Socrates. The accuser said that in the terrible days of the Thirty Tyrants, Critias "bore the palm for greed and violence," while Alcibiades "exceeded all licentiousness and insolence" under the democracy. A few years after the brief rule of Critias and the tyrants was overthrown and the democracy revived, Socrates continued to teach the principles of elitist rule under the guise of government by virtuous men. A very democracy-sensitive public, just emerging from the several years of rule by terror, was obviously fearful that such teachings could again give rise to another revolution and dictatorship.

Despite all these circumstances unfavorable to Socrates, the 501 - man jury reached its verdict of guilty by only a narrow margin. Stone declares that Plato hated democracy, and this is evidenced by his own aristocratic upbringing, his influence by Socrates, and the elitist blueprint for the ideal government as presented in The Republic. Thus Socrates can be considered the father of many of the anti-democratic ideas later expressed by Plato, and at least some of the tyrannies enacted by Critias, Alcibiades, and others. For both good and bad, Socrates was a powerful influence of his time. But if Stone is right, then Socrates' centuries-old reputation for impeccable virtue and profound wisdom may now begin to show a stain here and there.

Long Island News

Getting new groups started. Since there is a demand for new groups on Long Island, the Long Island Great Books Council has developed a plan for launching such groups.

- 1) Demonstration discussions will be held at libraries on Long Island so that prospective participants can get some insight into what the Great Books experience is all about.
- 2) Qualified leaders are available, ready to help the new groups.
- 3) Leader training sessions will be held in the fall so that interested participants can learn about the techniques and develop the skills for leading groups organized by their community libraries.

Interested Long Islanders should contact either of the following coordinators concerning local demonstrations of leader training arrangements: Helen Mascia, 60-23 69th Lane, Maspeth, N.Y. 11376 (212-672-2487); or Jan Ojalvo, 115 Washington Drive, Centerport, N.Y. 11721 (516-271-8899). The first scheduled demonstration will be held September 12 at the Commack Library, 8:00 P.M.

One-Day June Institute. The Long Island Annual One-Day Institute was held on Sunday, June 3, at the Bryant Library in Roslyn. After discussing Buckminster Fuller's Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth and Alvin Toffler's Future Shock, the participants left with some hope for the future. At a time when the world's energy resources are being depleted, Fuller offers some positive and encouraging suggestions:

" We have thus discovered that we can make all of humanity successful through science's world-engulfing industrial evolution provided we are not so foolish as to continue to exhaust in a split second of astronomical history the orderly energy savings of billions of years energy conservation aboard Spaceship Earth. These energy savings have been put into our Spaceship's life-regeneration-guaranteeing bank account for use only in self-starter functions.

"The fossil fuel deposits of our Spaceship Earth correspond to our automobile's storage battery which must be conserved to turn over our engine's self-starter. Thereafter, our 'main engine,' the life regenerating processes, must operate exclusively on our vast daily energy income from the powers of wind, tide, water, and the direct Sun radiation energy . . . "

Special One-Day Institute at Neponsit. Jesse Plutzer has arranged a special One-Day Institute at the West End Temple in Neponsit. The theme: "Our Jewish Tradition -- How Viable In the Modern World?" The date: October 28. The readings: Tradition and Contemporary Experience -- Essays On Jewish Thought and Life, edited by A. Jospe; and All God's Children: the Cult Experience -- Salvation Or Slavery, by Stoner and Parke. The charge is \$12.50 per person, which includes books, lunch and refreshments. To register or for more information, contact Jesse Plutzer, 314 Beach 148th St., Neponsit, N.Y. 11694 212-634-1739).

Boston News

Fall Institute. The Metropolitan Boston Great Books Council's Fall Institute will be on October 12-14, IFriday to Sunday. This year's event will not be held at the popular Red Jacket Inn in South Yarmouth on Cape Cod. The inn's management has altered plans for hosting large special groups. Instead, this year's Fall Institute will be held in a fine inn in the Berkshires, near Pittsfield, Mass. Details are now being finalized (we're told that's not a "real" word) and notices are being sent out to all. The Berkshires site, incidentally, is closer to New York than to Boston, and should be very convenient for the New York and Philadelphia contingents. The scheduled readings:

The Idea of the Holy, by Rudolf Otto.

Holy the Firm, by Annie Dillard.

The Death of Ahasuerus, by Par Lagerkvist.

The price for the weekend (books, lodging, meals, etc.) has not been firmed yet, but the price will be lower than last fall. Details can be obtained by contacting Jean Sudhalter (617-244-9421) or Ann Mogan (617-237-3855).

Spring Institute. The One-Day Spring Institute held in June at Regis College in Weston, Mass., drew the highest attendance on record for this event -- well over 100. Credit for the attendance increase goes to Board member Jack Hockett, who worked diligently at advance publicity and promotion. The readings were: The Courage To Be, by Paul Tillich, and Cyrano de Bergerac, by Edmond Rostand. Following the event the Council's annual meeting took place. All current officers and board members were re-elected.

New Groups. Two new Great Books groups will definitely be starting next fall in Winchester and Lincoln, Mass., and several others are currently in the embryonic stage. The Council is providing leaders and guidance in getting these new groups launched.

Philadelphia News

New Philadelphia Officers. Henry Cohen has been elected as new President of the Philadelphia Great Books Council. Vice President is Marty Weiss, who now turns over the Council's books to new Treasurer Harold Moll. Miriam Weiss is Corresponding Secretary. Rita Heller continues as Recording Secretary (it would be difficult to find another minutes-taker so concise and precise).

Philadelphia Spring Seminar. More than 200 participants attended the one-day Seminar last May at the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science. The provocative theme was the concept of the androgenous mind -- the intriguing idea of male-female within a single personality. Sylvia Kasser ably chaired the event. Lee and Malcolm Sharpe hosted a night-before party at their home for out-of-town guests, local leaders and board members.

Successful fund-raising effort. Martin Weiss, chairman of the Philadelphia Council's fund-raising effort, reports gratifying success with this year's results. He tells us that not only did generous contributions flow in in response to the appeal, but checks accompanied with comments such as: "Some of my most highly prized friendships, learnings and experiences can be traced to my Great Books activities" . . . "This is my way of saying thanks for opening unlimited horizons for me" . . . "I never knew a solicitor could make me so happy." This was the Council's first fund-raising effort to refurbish a treasury that had become nearly exhausted because of the expanded 1979-80 scheduled activities and programs. Marty Weiss, speaking for his Committee, expresses thanks to all those who have contributed, and also for the many notes that revealed the warm inner feelings and gratitude of Great Bookers for what Great Books has done to enrich their lives.

Philadelphia Fall Institute: The 9th Philadelphia Fall Institute will be held on the weekend of November 16-18 at the Pocono Manor Inn. Cost is \$97 per person (double occupancy). A deposit of \$35 must accompany your registration. If you must cancel, the deposit, less charge for books, will be refunded if notification is received by Saturday, October 20. Deposit should be sent to Betsy Falante, 403 Henley Court, Doylestown, Pa. 18901.

Theme: On Responsibility.

Readings: The Fall, by Camus

The Grand Inquisitor and other selections from Dostoevsky's

The Brothers Karamazov.

Nectar In the Sieve, by Markandaya.

REGISTRATION FORM:

Enclosed is deposit check for \$ _____ (\$35 per person) made payable to
FALL INSTITUTE COMMITTEE

NAMES (couples please give first name of each person)

First _____ Last _____

ADDRESS _____ Phone _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

- Check here if you prefer a non-smoking group. We will try to accomodate you. If you want a room with or near someone, write your request on the bottom of this form and we'll do our best to honor your request.

Reader-Response Criticism

Philadelphia's Emil Bix submits the following thoughtful insights, paraphrased from the manuscript, Learning How To Read: Interpretation and Reader-Response Criticism, by Prof. Steven Mailloux, his teacher at Temple University:

Several contemporary schools of literary criticism hold that the meaning of a text is created not in the writing, but only when it is read. We need not go along with the extreme claim that the reader shapes the text more than does its author; yet we can draw some startling parallels between the principles of Reader-Response criticism, and the ways we experience meaning in a Great Books discussion. The interpretive strategies used by Reader-Response critics to make sense of novels, poetry, drama, or any literary discourse, assume a reader who is an active participant rather than a passive observer. Meaning is seen as something that happens, not on the page but as interaction between the flow of print and the reader's mediating consciousness. In this view, there can be no objective meaning anchored in the text; the author's manipulative techniques guide the reader to the intended experiential response.

A brief sample analysis of The Overcoat by Nikolai Gogol shows the narrator's cautionary stance, expressed in gratuitous asides: "I forget which town"; "It would be unfair to say"; "If I am not mistaken"; etc., to make him more real to us than the protagonist, on whom he heaps a good deal of scorn throughout the tale. Our discussion, then, may be guided toward our experience of pitying empathy with the little, balding clerk rejected by his brethren; or else our sensibilities may be jolted by the narrator's cruel undercutting of these sentiments, in his jeering account of Akaky's greedy table manners, or of his "knack of passing under windows just when refuse happened to be thrown out." Again, the direction of our discussion may tend toward breaking our hearts, in sharing the horror of Akaky's death without mourners; or we may be taken aback by the narrator's dispassionate comparison between our hero's self-centeredness and the richly fulfilled family life of the "important personage". Finally, we may gloat over the ghost's revenge on a hostile society; or we may see this specter as the only surviving remnant of Akaky's now grotesquely disembodied passion for a material object, the cherished overcoat -- the transcendent trace of a clerk who would copy life itself. It is not Akaky who changes in the story, but the reader who changes his perception through the author's -- and the discussion leader's deliberate disorientation.

The cultural conventions each of us brings to the reading experience, shape our interpretations in keeping with our education, opinions, concerns, prior readings, or linguistic competences. We often get trapped into premature conclusions, so posited by the text. Further reading may challenge our first interpretation and thereby give us deeper understanding. Textual ambiguities need not be resolved; our reading experience lies in their recognition as an event. We may identify the course of our lives with that of a character; become self-consciously aware of resemblances between his actions and our reading experience; or transform our initial feelings of superiority to self-criticism -- through misplaced assumptions, shattered expectations, trial by error, and correction from the text. Facts do not cause interpretations; interpretations constitute facts.

What has all this to do with Great Books discussions? My descriptive enterprise has been confined so far to the individual's reading experience. Yet when you multiply the insights so gained from a single reading, by those of a dozen discussants participating in a free exchange of responses, you will reap predictably manifold enrichment. The resultant piecing together of any given text is bound to bring many more rewards than the sum total of its parts.

Neitzsche Criticizes the Athenian Idol The Problem of Socrates*

Does life have meaning? Concerning life, the wisest men of all ages have judged alike: it is no good. Always and everywhere one has heard the same sound from their mouths -- a sound full of doubt, full of melancholy, full of weariness of life, full of resistance to life. Even Socrates said, as he died: "To live -- that means to be sick a long time: I owe Asclepius the Savior a rooster." Even Socrates was tired of it. What does that evidence? What does it evince? Formerly one would have said (--oh it has been said, and loud enough, and especially by our pessimists): "At least something of all this must be true! The consensus of the sages evidences the truth." Shall we still talk like that today? May we? "At least something must be sick here," we retort. These wisest men of all ages -- they should first be scrutinized closely. Were they all perhaps shaky on their legs? late? tottery? decadents? Could it be that wisdom appears on earth as a raven, inspired by a little whiff of carrion?



The living can't judge life. This irreverent thought that the great sages are types of decline first occurred to me precisely in a case where it is most strongly opposed by both scholarly and un-scholarly prejudice: I recognized Socrates and Plato to be symptoms of degeneration, tools of the Greek dissolution, psuedo-Greek, anti-Greek. The consensus of the sages -- I comprehended this ever more clearly -- proves least of all that they were right in what they agreed on: it shows rather that they themselves, these wisest men, agreed in some physiological respect, and hence adopted the same negative attitude to life -- had to adopt it. Judgments, judgments of value, concerning life, for it or against it, can, in the end, never be true: they have value only as symptoms, they are worthy of consideration only as symptoms; in themselves such judgments are stupidities. One must by all means stretch out one's fingers and make the attempt to grasp this amazing finesse, that the value of life cannot be estimated. Not by the living, for they are an interested party, even a bone of contention, and not judges; not by the dead, for a different reason. For a philosopher to see a problem in the value of life is thus an objection to him, a question mark concerning his wisdom, an un-wisdom. Indeed? All these great wise men -- they were not only decadents but not wise at all? But I return to the problem of Socrates.



Socrates the monster. In origin, Socrates belonged to the lowest class: Socrates was plebs. We know, we can still see for ourselves, how ugly he was. But ugliness, in itself an objection, is among the Greeks almost a refutation. Was Socrates a Greek at all? Ugliness is often enough the expression of a development that has been crossed, thwarted by crossing. Or it appears as declining development. The anthropologists among the criminologists tell us that the typical criminal is ugly: monstrum in fronte, monstrum in animo. But the criminal is a decadent. Was Socrates a typical criminal? At least that would not be contradicted by the famous judgment of the physiognomist which sounded so offensive to the friends of Socrates. A foreigner who knew about faces once passed through Athens and told Socrates to his face that he was a monstrum -- that he harbored in himself all the bad vices and appetites. And Socrates merely answered: "You know me, sir!"

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