

The Antagonism between Personal and Public Virtue

At the end of Professor Smith's lecture on the *Crito*, in a fashion similar to the antagonism between the competing world views of philosophy and poetry outlined in sub-subunit 1.4.2, Smith discloses another antagonism between what he calls two permanent and irreconcilable moral codes constitutive for a *polis*. The first code is built upon Socrates' notion of an individual's sovereign reason fostered through philosophical discourse with others. The second code consists of the established law and customs of the *polis*, which takes priority over individual conscience in the form of what might be called an ancient precursor to the notion of a social contract. In the *Crito*, Socrates presents an effective defense of social contract theory or the second code, while in the *Apology* and in the *Republic*, he seems to advocate the first code. According to Smith, the two codes are irreconcilable: you can have one or you can have neither, but it is not possible to have both.

Under the first code, philosophy alone is capable of arriving at that which is true, just, and virtuous, and provides freedom from the power of the state while safeguarding the soul from complicity with what would seem the intrinsic injustice and evils of politics. Socrates at 31c3-32a1 of the *Apology*:

It may seem strange that while I go around and give this advice privately and interfere in private affairs, I do not venture to go to the assembly and there advise the city...Be sure, gentlemen of the jury, that if I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself. Do not be angry with me for speaking the truth; *no man will survive who genuinely opposes you or any other crowd and prevents the occurrence of many unjust and illegal happenings in the city*. A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time.¹

And from the *Republic* at 496c5-e2:

And those who have been of this little company [of philosophers] and have tasted the sweetness and blessedness of this possession and who have also come to understand the madness of the multitude sufficiently and have seen that there is nothing, if I may say so, sound or right in any present politics, and that there is no ally with whose aid the champion of justice could escape destruction, but that he would be as a man who has fallen among wild beasts, unwilling to share their misdeeds and unable to hold out singly against the savagery of all, and he would thus, before he could in any way benefit his friends or the state, come to an untimely end without doing any good to himself or others—for all these reasons I say

¹ Plato, *Apology*, in *Plato: Five Dialogues*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, Company, Inc. 1981) pg. 36, emphasis mine.

the philosopher remains quiet, minds his own affairs, and, as it were, standing aside under shelter of a wall in a storm and blast of dust and sleet and seeing others filled full of lawlessness, is content if in any way he may keep himself free from iniquity and unholy deeds through his life and take his departure with fair hope, serene and well-content when the end comes.²

With regard to the first passage, it may have come to pass that if Socrates had entered politics, he would have *literally* died long ago prior to his trial. But it is important to understand this phrase in terms of Socrates' principle that the unexamined life—a life devoid of philosophical introspection and discourse—is a life not worth living. In other words, Socrates as the embodiment of philosophy would have died upon his official entry into the public sphere (or shortly thereafter)—philosophy and politics unable to coexist within one station, at least in this non-ideal realm as opposed that of the philosopher/kings in the *Republic*. Recall that Professor Smith concludes his lecture (1.4.1) on the *Apology* with two questions: “How are we to understand Socrates' claim that the pursuit of justice requires him to turn away from public to private life? What is meant by this new kind of citizen that is to be concerned with private virtue—the virtue of one's soul?”

With regard to the second code, recall the situation presented in the *Crito*. Socrates must decide whether to accept his friend Crito's plea that he escape from prison rather than be executed. Crito invokes the argument that Socrates' conviction was unjust, and that his “present situation makes clear that the opinion of the majority can inflict not the least but pretty well the greatest evils if one is slandered among them.”³ Socrates makes a range of arguments as to why he should not escape, some more trivial than others, the most substantial of which asserting the primacy of Athenian law over himself as a citizen, a position diametrically opposed to Socrates' arguments in the *Apology* and the *Republic* touting the primacy of philosophical reasoning over all, especially that of the majority opinions or the proclivities of the masses. Socrates responds to Crito at 50c5:

Then what if the laws said: “Was that the agreement between us, Socrates, or was it to respect the judgments that the city came to?”...Is your wisdom such as not to realize that your country is to be honored more than your mother, your father and all your ancestors, that it is more to be revered and more sacred, and that it counts for more among the gods and sensible men, that you must worship it, yield to it and placate its anger more than your father's? You must either persuade it or obey its orders, and endure in silence whatever it instructs you to endure, whether

² Plato, *Republic*, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Paul Shorey (Princeton, Princeton University Press,) 1961, pg. 732.

³ Plato, *Crito*, in *Plato: Five Dialogues*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, Company, Inc. 1981) pg. 47.

blows or bonds, and if it leads you into war to be wounded or killed, you must obey. To do so is right, and one must not give way or retreat or leave one's post, but both in war and courts and everywhere else, one must obey the commands of one's city and country, or persuade it as to the nature of justice. It is impious to bring violence to bear against your mother or father, and is much more so to use it against your country." What shall we say Crito, that the laws speak the truth, or not?

Crito: I think they do.⁴

Socrates was not a hermit and made it clear both through his words and actions that he would take a public stance in refusing to carry out orders from the *polis* that he considered illegal or immoral. He also fulfilled his civic duties of required military service and political office, yet he did not seek public office or voluntary civic duties, even though it is clear that he cared deeply about his surrounding community. One rather positive answer (at least in juxtaposition to the above, rather grim passage from the *Republic*) to Smith's question as to why Socrates claims that justice requires him to turn away from public to private life is that Socrates saw himself as revolutionizing the Athenian *polis* from the inside out. A beautiful, good, and just *polis* could only come about through the pursuit of personal virtue, or the perfection of the individual soul, which in turn would cause a gradual yet substantive shift in both individual and collective priorities, as well as the norms, of Athenian society. Similar to his view of the poets who dwell in ignorance while pandering to an unwitting audience, Socrates views politicians with disdain as having turned their backs (assuming they had ever faced forward) on the philosophical pursuit of knowledge and expertise in favor of the accumulation of wealth and power, as well as the cultivation of the physical body. Socrates' disinterest in these latter pursuits and his generally unconventional manner set him apart, and at 29d1-30b3 of the *Apology*, he responds to his own question as to what he would say if the jury would acquit him under the condition that he no longer practice philosophy:

"Gentlemen of the jury...as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practice philosophy, to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?" Then if one of you disputes this and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once or leave him, but I shall question him, examine him and test him, and if I do not think he has attained the goodness that he says he has I shall reproach him because he attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things...For I go around

⁴ Ibid, 53.

doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: "Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence brings about wealth and all other public and private blessings for men."⁵

Again, Socrates' affirmation here of the primacy of the perfection of the soul over that of all other considerations is problematic: the perfection of the soul, as stated, being a necessarily private pursuit, while here it seems to be a rather public endeavor. Keep in focus the antagonism to which Professor Smith refers in his lecture between Socrates as a public, and therefore a political and social figure with a sense of political obligation, and Socrates as a person striving for perfection of his own self through philosophical discourse with others in almost exclusively small, private or semi-private settings. As mentioned, in the *Crito*, Socrates presents a defense of what could be construed as a precursor to social contract theory. Justice arises through a social contract as a *modus vivendi* between self-interested parties that would commit injustice, if they did not fear reprisal, and want to avoid being treated unjustly by others without being able to commit injustice in return. This point of view is expressed by Glaucon in Book II of the *Republic*. Whereas in the *Apology* and to a greater degree in the *Republic*, Socrates does not see a social contract as the original source of justice but as a good in itself arising from the pursuit of moral self-perfection. Justice arises from a well-regulated soul, is prior to the establishment of a social contract, and exceeds the kind of utilitarian or practical value Glaucon assigns to it.

Another question from Smith's lecture on the *Crito* is worth consideration here: "What would a community of Socratic citizens—meaning citizens imbued with philosophical reasoning in their thoughts and actions—look like?" In the *Apology*, Socrates makes it clear that he is a rarity, and even gives notice to the jury that Athenian society is lucky to have such a rarity. Socrates also makes it clear in the *Republic* that although everyone should focus primarily on self-knowledge and the perfection of their own soul, few will ever become philosophers in the full sense of the term. Most will depend upon the laws and customs for which they lack defensible philosophical reasons, and the antagonism between philosophy and politics will persist. However, one interpretation of the *Republic* is that it serves not so much as a directive or blueprint for an ideal *polis*, but as unattainable yet regulative ideal to which non-ideal societies can measure themselves or aspire.

⁵ *Apology*, 34-35.