THE SOCRATIC PARADOX
Part I

I had promised myself to leave Socrates and Plato out of these essays from now on. A message I received from a reader a few days ago makes me postpone keeping that promise for the time it will take me to compose an adequate reply.

In relation to my complaining to G.A. about the dearth of substantive comments I receive from readers, O.T. writes this (translated somewhat loosely from the Russian with the help of Google-translate):

“"The point underlying many of your essays appears to be that Socrates was right in equating virtue with knowledge. Even when that thesis is not directly implied by what you say, it is often presupposed by it, or hovers in some other way around the conceptual periphery. Perhaps the reason why you receive few challenging comments is that Socrates’ thesis is familiar and old, and that you have said little to make it seem less paradoxical today than it was already perceived to be in antiquity. If you believe that Socrates’ thought on this topic is clear, your readers may find it helpful if you explained why you believe that when no one else does."

A challenging comment indeed! Its author may be mistaken in suggesting that my exercising greater philosophical care would elicit more thoughtful criticism. But he is right about my being tempted by Socrates’ position, and right as well about the influence of that temptation on quite a few of the posts on this site. It often hovers, as he aptly puts it, around the conceptual periphery.

I will also concede that there can be something intellectually annoying about writing that seems endlessly to run around the barn, as though the writer understood something important but, for some odd reason, cannot bring himself clearly to lay out what that is. If the author’s writing appears to suggest, as in this case, that he has resolved the so-called Socratic Paradox, well, then let’s have a look at that purported resolution so that we all know what we are talking about.

In other words, I think I understand the reader’s frustration and I plead guilty to causing it. Anyone who reads some of these essays with a discerning philosophical eye will recognize my frequent toying with Socrates’ famous
thesis. He or she will naturally want to know whether I have anything useful to add to the fruitless debate about it that has gone on for centuries. And when all they see is a replay of the intellectual cat-and-mouse game that Socrates and Plato themselves engaged in when it came to this proposition, impatience is the natural response.

And were I to reply, as I initially planned to do, that I am merely tempted by Socrates’ thesis, not committed to it, I am likely only to increase that reader’s impatience. For then the question is, “What is so tempting about a thesis that seems obviously false or the meaning of which is totally unclear?”

I have avoided addressing this question directly for a number of reasons. One is that I think it pointless to discuss Socrates’ equation of virtue with knowledge in the same terms in which it has been discussed up to now. Do that and you will end up with the same result those discussions have yielded, namely that Socrates was wrong. Contrary to what he apparently believed, knowledge is not a sufficient condition for doing the right thing. It happens all the time that people who apparently know what they should be doing fail to do it.

Moreover, on the face of it, nothing is accomplished either by arguing that these people do not really know what they should be doing. The standard of knowledge that one has to invoke in order to make that argument stick is so strict that, according to it, no one knows much of anything. Nor is one ultimately ahead with the enterprise by recalling that Plato would probably have welcomed that implication. After all, the real objective is understanding Socrates’ claim itself; it is not to reconstruct its supposed plausibility in terms of some other arcane beliefs that Plato or someone else may have held at the time. As Euripides reminds his audiences during the same period, one knows just as clearly that adultery is wrong as one knows anything else. But knowing it does not prevent Phaedra from attempting to seduce her stepson Hippolytus. How would Socrates himself have explained this obvious fact away? Or how did he?

A related reason I have shied away from the issue is that I see no promise of success either in the scholarly enterprise aimed at showing that the Greek archaic conceptual landscape differed from ours in ways that, once taken into account, might help one understand Socrates better. Scholars from Bruno Snell to Arthur Adkins devoted large efforts to analyzing the
language of Homer with a view to showing that the earlier Greeks’ map of human psychological endowment diverges in significant ways from our own. That map reflects a different sense of self, action, intention, and responsibility than ours. Homer’s Greeks frequently come across as having a more impressionistic feeling of life than we do, as though, unlike us, they experienced their own behavior more often as happening to them than as something they did.

Those are provocative conclusions, but while I have immense respect for the value of such scholarship, I do not see its actual results advancing our understanding of Socrates’ paradoxical claim. When all is said and done, there was not a time in the earlier history of Greek culture when the identity of virtue and knowledge was part of commonplace understanding, or even in the neighborhood of any such understanding. Nor has this research unearthed a single archaic Greek concept the imagined currency of which points to the plausibility of that identity, or even of its possibility.

In that respect, I incline to the suspicion that, far from being a product of his culture, Socrates was a genuine innovator. I suspect that he was ahead of his time, rather than coming at the culture with the resources of its own past so as to help revitalize its wisdom.

Admittedly, those, too, are somewhat arcane beliefs that, so far, have little going for them except my conviction that a man as thoughtful as Socrates would not have been mistaken about something this basic. He had to know that it happens all the time that people knowingly do the wrong thing, or knowingly fail to do the right thing, and that it is therefore false on the face of it that knowledge is a sufficient condition of virtue. So, what did he take himself to be saying? And why does he not explain himself? Or why doesn’t his brightest student Plato provide us in this context with the explanation Socrates did not?

As far as I can see, these questions have no historical answers in the sense that more historical research is likely to answer them. They seem not to have philosophical answers either, at least not in the sense that rehearsing the arguments animating the debate might get us somewhere. Trying to answer them therefore presents a daunting challenge that a sensible person might understandably choose to avoid. I have accordingly contented myself mostly with phenomenological descriptions of experience that tend only to suggest that there may be something to Socrates’ claim.
But what if Socrates, correctly understood, happened to have been right? Wouldn’t his position deserve a full, up-front hearing? What if indeed! Why think that he might have been? And how show that he could have been?

I think that a good place to start on this long, rocky road is with the question why Plato’s early, so-called Socratic, dialogues make for annoying reading. Piety may forbid the implication that they do, but the plain truth is that while placing heavy demands on one’s attention, these dialogues inevitably leave one empty-handed. When, after having labored through all the arguments of the Charmides or the Laches, for instance, you ask yourself what new knowledge your efforts have earned you, the answer is, “None whatsoever!” Do you now know what temperance or courage is, or know more about them than you did before? Not really. Perhaps you know that temperance is not slowness or modesty, or courage not the same thing as fearlessness. But can you say what each actually is? No. Are you ahead of where you were before you started? Not obviously. So what’s the point of the exercise?

The question usually receives the pious reply that it is very important to realize that one does not know some things that one thought one knew. But a far more rewarding outcome would have been to be brought to knowledge of them. Isn’t that why one reads this kind of thing in the first place?

I raise these questions because trying to answer them brings to light assumptions that we ourselves make that happen to be central to all these issues, including our response to the Socratic Paradox. Chief among those assumptions is that all important truths are capturable in clear, straightforward language.

If one asks why Plato wrote dialogues at all instead of discursive treatises, the answer involves his apparent conviction that the truth about some things is recondite and cannot be directly conveyed in plain language; that truth is, in effect, extra-linguistic, and people have to be led, prodded, nudged, and encouraged to discover it for themselves.

The answer feels unsatisfactory because the thesis about truth and language seems itself to be one of those recondite truths. Reject it and the dialogue form loses its point; it then comes across as making excessive, potentially irritating, demands on readers in the service of objectives that could be met more easily with straightforward talk.
But there is another way of saying that: while Plato chose to write dialogues for reasons that may be questionable, readers, too, make choices the appropriateness of which is open to question. Impatience with Plato’s choice of the dialogue form arises out of the conviction that there is no truth that cannot be adequately captured in clear language, supported perhaps by the belief that truth is (merely) a property of statements or propositions. That belief turns the very idea of extra-linguistic truth into a contradiction in terms, a form of nonsense, in effect.

The real issue here is, not the nature of truth, but the power of language to capture certain realities in such a way that anyone with an adequate grasp of the language may be brought to cognizance of them. Does language possess that power? Plato apparently does not think so. But his impatient reader does, or believes, at any rate, either that no uncapturable realities exist or that such as may are not worth talking about. How could he know that? In fact, he doesn’t know it; he believes it, or wants to believe it. His believing it represents a choice, not necessarily an arbitrary or uncomplicated one, but a choice all the same. And while there is much that could be – and has been -- said in favor of making it, the one thing that cannot be said is that it is obviously the right choice.

It strikes me as a serious mistake to think that Plato was philosophically naïve about this issue.

In the dialogue *Charmides*, for example, he presents Socrates asking a promising young man what *sophrosyne* is. The Greek word stood for temperance, restraint and, more generally, practical wisdom or sound-mindedness. The young man (Charmides) is supposedly endowed with that virtue. “If that is so,” Socrates says to him, “answering my question should be easy, since you know the language.” In effect, he says to him, “Since the reality that is *sophrosyne* exists in you, and since you know the language, see if you can capture in words what it consists of.” It subsequently turns out, not only that Charmides is unable to capture that reality adequately, but neither is his much more sophisticated uncle and tutor Critias, who is also present. And by the time the dialogue ends, after an immensely complex philosophical discussion, *sophrosyne* remains out there uncaptured by any of the participants, including, arguably, Socrates himself. I say ‘arguably’ because, as he typically does in these contexts, Socrates hints – or may be read as hinting -- that *sophrosyne* is the knowledge of the good.
Unfortunately, that *sophrosyne* is that knowledge appears to be an exceedingly obscure statement, and hardly counts as an adequate capturing of anything. It certainly cannot be said that upon hearing it, anyone with an adequate grasp of the language will be brought to cognizance of the reality that is *sophrosyne*.

The upshot is that one may have a perfect grasp of the language without being able on that account to capture certain realities in its net. The reason is not that one’s linguistic skills leave something to be desired; it is that there is only so much that language can do. And to argue here, as one may be tempted to do, that the dialogue as a whole succeeds well-enough in capturing what sophrosyne actually is does not work either. Otherwise it would not be true that virtually everyone who reads it comes away baffled, instead of brought to effective cognizance of anything beyond his or her own incomprehension.

I think that one may take that as Plato saying to his impatient audience, “So you want to tell me that there are no realities uncapturable by language? Surely you would not deny that *sophrosyne* is a reality, at least in some people, and one very much worth talking about. Well, please tell me what it is. Capture it in words for me. The number and length of those words is up to you. See if you can do better than the people in this dialogue, or better than I in writing the piece. And if you can’t, as I am willing to bet you can’t, are you going to conclude that your grasp of the language is inadequate? Probably not. So, how about giving this simplistic truth-and-language business a rest, and trying things my way? You might actually come out ahead of where you are now.”

Now that imagined speech is not an argument that shows conclusively that some realities are in principle beyond the effective reach of language. Whether or not the reader is actually capable of doing better remains an open question, as does what follows from the possible fact that he isn’t. Perhaps he has not tried hard enough; or perhaps someone more intelligent than he might actually do better. Looking at the situation twenty-four hundred years later, all we know is that so far no one apparently has.

And just in case one may be tempted to reply that no one has done better because, with sophrosyne being a culturally defunct concept, no one has tried or cares, the same point may obviously be made with respect to
courage that we supposedly do care about, and which receives the same treatment in Plato’s dialogue *Laches*.

The imagined speech does suggest that the quest for knowledge about some things, and even the conveying of that knowledge, may be a very different business from the one readers take it to be. More must be asked of them in terms of work, patience, and courage than they are ordinarily prepared to give if that conveying is to succeed. And as long as they entertain assumptions according to which the only person who has to do any serious work is the author, they are not likely to give it. Instead, they will respond with impatience and hold it against the author that he seems to be running around the barn.

If we can momentarily resist the attraction of pieties about the sheer beauty of knowing that one knows nothing, and also look beyond the immediate implications of the speech for readers, we will notice that Plato’s position is a profoundly disconcerting one. If, as he suggests, the realities that constitute the objects of moral knowledge systematically elude the attempts of language to capture them, then the effective transmission of moral knowledge from one generation to the next turns into a daunting problem. The success of that transmission happens to be one of the chief objectives of culture. One would think therefore that finding a solution to the problem would be high on the culture’s priority list.

Like ours, the Athenians’ solution to the problem was to deny that it exists. It is a convenient solution but, if Plato is right, that convenience carries a high price tag, namely culture-wide moral confusion, including confusion about how to remedy that confusion, as well as resistance to any such remedies.

Whether virtue can be taught is not a trivial philosophical question when one thinks of it in terms of the cultural imperative to convey moral wisdom and understanding from one generation to the next. If it cannot be taught, then the collective suffering of which that wisdom is the fruit will have to be repeated again and again. But how *can* it be taught if it is true that the objects of that teaching elude the effective grasp of language, as Plato suggests that they do, or true, as he also suggests, that language which might plausibly be seen as capturing them will prove incomprehensible to anyone who has not previously acquainted himself personally with their extra-linguistic reality?
From Plato’s perspective, virtue is teachable, but teaching it effectively means prodding, encouraging, and enabling people to make the efforts necessary to achieve that personal acquaintance. It sounds like a rather labor-intensive endeavor on the part of both teacher and student. It is therefore unlikely to even get started as long as people believe – as long as the culture believes -- that there is an easier way. From Plato’s point of view, one form that belief assumes is the conviction that there are no important truths beyond the reach of language; its emotional version is impatience with language that merely strives to encourage discovery instead of simply delivering the goods, goods which, as it happens, lie beyond the power of language directly to deliver.

Plato’s primary objective in his Socratic dialogues is to put that belief out of commission. To the extent that we share the belief, his enterprise annoys us. Or, in the face of it, we find our way to philosophical pieties that divert our attention from the enormous tasks that we face individually and collectively if he is right, which tasks we have not even begun to attend to and the full burdens of which we would prefer to avoid in the future as well.

Call it one of the great ironies of history that philosophy today, at least in the Anglo-American world, stands for the proposition that what cannot be said clearly is not worth saying. If Plato was right on this point and if, as Whitehead suggested, all philosophy is a footnote to Plato, that is without a doubt the saddest one of them all.

Back on earth, with the exception of Socrates, the Athenians probably did not differ all that much from us when it came to intellectual cowardice and predilections to obscure the inconvenient obvious. But there is one respect in which they may have differed. They took theater seriously as a cultural instrument designed for the transmission of moral knowledge. Like poetry and story-telling, theater was invented to serve the difficult purpose of convey what we know about what matters, as well as reminding ourselves of it periodically.

As a harsh critic of poetry and drama, Plato found himself in an awkward position when he had to avail himself of their resources. But avail himself he did.
His primary objective is changing his readers’ attitudes. A sound argument might accomplish that, but it also might not. No argument wears its soundness on its face. What you make of it depends on what you bring to it. And when the issue addressed is complex and you happen, moreover, to have an immense personal stake in the outcome, there is a good chance that the argument will not get through to you. This is especially true when it comes to moral issues or, using Plato’s language, matters of virtue.

The point is worth dwelling on because it involves more than simple matters of subjectivity or willful irrationality. A person who lacks self-control and sets out to acquire it will probably fail, since the effective acquisition of self-control itself requires self-control. Just so, reading, thinking, and reflecting about temperance or courage do not constitute time out from life. One engages in those activities with the same qualities of one’s spontaneity – the same degree of temperance or courage – that one brings to any other life activity. If temperance is, let us say, appropriate restraint, and one does not normally possess it, or possess it to a sufficient degree, in the rest of one’s life, then there is no good reason to suppose that one is suddenly and magically capable of it in reading, thinking and reflecting. On the contrary, there is every reason to suppose the opposite, which fact virtually guarantees that the quality of one’s thinking is no greater than that of anything else one does. Let the topic to be thought about be appropriate restraint, and chances are that those most in need of thinking well about it are also those least likely to be capable of such thinking.

That is the conundrum lying at the heart of the problem Plato faced when he wrote his Socratic dialogues. He was not interested in preaching to the choir of the virtuous but in changing the fundamental attitudes of those deficient in their possession of virtue. But how do you do that? You can present arguments, but arguments have to be read right and understood. Moreover, they have to persuade people who are, by hypothesis, confused about what is what and incapable of thinking straight about realities that are inherently elusive in relation to the power of language.

There are more effective ways of changing fundamental attitudes than by presenting arguments. In Plato’s time, the natural home of those ways was the theater.

What Plato does with the Charmides and with other early dialogues is to bring to bear classic dramatic technique, especially as one sees it practiced
by Sophocles. In Antigone, for example, Sophocles initially caters to the prejudices and problematic predilections of his audience so as to enable himself subsequently to bring them to grief. The somewhat heartless partisan of Creon, initially encouraged in that partisanship by Antigone’s temperamental excesses and unorthodox behaviors, ends up forced to confront his own sentimentality and rebelliousness in the face of the apparently unjust treatment of Creon by the gods. Just ask yourself, “What does Creon do that Achilles in the Iliad did not also do?” Sophocles’ audience would have asked it! Yet Achilles ended up a celebrated hero while Creon is destroyed. And why? Because when the gods send Achilles word that it is time to stop desecrating Hector’s corpse, he listens, not least because the gods’ messenger happens to be his own mother. When they send Creon a similar message, he resists, hesitates, and delays, not least because the messenger is a soothsayer whose credibility is open to doubt. Just for that, Creon pays as Achilles did not: he loses his son Haemon, his wife, and, for what she is worth, his future daughter in law, as well as the respect of the community. Add to this terrible picture that he just lost his other son, Megareus, in the battle that Polyneices brought down upon the city. Creon’s punishment is not just.

But just so, the sentimental partisan of Antigone, also initially encouraged in that stance by Creon’s outrageous decree, his relish in issuing it, and the graphic portrayal of its implementation, ends up forced to confront his own heartlessness in his impatience in the face of Creon’s lamentations and in his unwillingness to pity him.

Sophocles’ dramaturgy can take one’s breath away.

Heartlessness and sentimentality are ultimately the same thing, namely unwillingness to suffer what must be suffered. They are simply the two faces of a problematic predilection for excessive anesthesia. But arguments will not change people thus addicted. Bringing them down, as Sophocles does, will, if anything can. It involves bringing them face to face with themselves and not liking what they see, in effect putting them through an emotional trauma.

One would think that doing that to people could be a somewhat risky business. It seems virtually incomprehensible that an audience would come away from the experience celebrating the playwright, which is apparently what happened in the case of the first performance of Antigone. But
Sophocles is exceedingly careful. He does not force anyone into partisanship. Members of his audience are brought to grief only to the extent that they bring their problematic dispositions to their understanding of the play. If they just let the play be instead of seeing what is not really there to be seen, they would be fine. Instead, they are busy trying to rewrite the play, enabling themselves to misunderstand it, even as it goes on before them, and they end up knocked out by it.

Their behavior makes perfect sense: they don’t like to suffer; they prefer understanding -- or feeling -- their way out of its necessity. But necessity brooks no dissent. You can do what you want, but you’ll pay the price. It is not necessity that brings that price down on you. You do it to yourself when you reach for the idea that you have found a way of not paying it.

Of course, we do that all the time, both individually and collectively. Civilization is the result. It is the fruit of our battle against suffering. But the trick is to know what we can get away with and what we cannot. It is to know when to let things be lest we make them worse.

All of these notions have deep roots in ancient Greek culture. Their presence went some way toward guaranteeing that Sophocles was celebrated by his audiences instead of lynched.

The same cultural context defines Plato’s practice. The speech imagined above is not an argument. It is the voice of Greek drama speaking to ears that understood it, saying to them, “Let it be. Don’t try to rewrite this as you think it should be written or you’ll get nowhere. You can’t rewrite it in any case because you don’t know where it is going. Just listen and give it a chance. Work with me instead of against me. And in case you are tempted to do something else, think again. Or: try it and see what happens.”

Differently put: “It is not the dialogue form that brings you down and leaves you empty-handed: it’s your own intellectual laziness and cowardice, your misguided cleverness, your believing that you can have something for nothing, and your unwillingness to rise to the occasion because doing so would be hard. In short, it is your own shortcomings. You think that’s unfair? Well then, prove me wrong by getting on with it!”

As Sophocles knew that the audience of his play *Antigone* brought their heartlessness or their sentimentality with them when they came to the
theater, so Plato knew that his readers brought their lack of sophrosyne or of courage with them as they approached his dialogues on these topics. And as Sophocles structured his play to exploit those audience predilections in order to enable himself to break through to them, so Plato writes with a similar strategy in mind.

A visit to the theater is not time out from life. Nor is an intellectual discussion about something that matters to people, as sophrosyne and courage did to Plato’s audience. He thought he could count on them to understand that because they understood the same thing well enough when they walked into the theater. He may have overestimated them, as, arguably, even Sophocles overestimated his audience. They may have celebrated him, but he was disappointed with their reaction to Antigone. Why else would he have gone out of his way in a later play (Oedipus at Colonnus) retroactively to strengthen Antigone’s hand by presenting her decision to defy Creon as the keeping of a promise to her brother? Chances are that too many in his Antigone audience had seen the play purely as the tragedy of Creon.

Plato would have sympathized: that’s theater for you: your focus is too broad, you are taking on too much, and therefore cannot adequately control the effect you have.

Meanwhile, he too puts on plays. He thinks he can do better with a sharper, narrower focus. All the same, he avails himself of standard dramatic technique and counts on his audience to understand what he is doing and to go along. He appears to be running around the barn because he has to do that in order to make a person see that, for some odd reason, his thinking seems to be out of control. His mind refuses to do his bidding. Here he was, absolutely sure that he knew what sophrosyne is, perhaps thought even that he possessed it, but now he can’t seem to say what it is. Well, perhaps he does not know the first thing about it. Or perhaps he overestimates the power of language. Unless he can be brought to that disconcerting realization, he is not likely to abandon the pointless affectations, as in the case of Charmides, or the misguided cleverness, as in the case of Critias, that each respectively mistakes for sophrosyne and that gets in the way of the intelligent pursuit of any genuine understanding.

As long as it occurs, how that realization is induced does not especially matter. The stakes are too high, especially for the larger culture which, unless it comes to that realization, will persist in its insouciant wallowing
along instead of getting down to the serious business of attending to its own well-being.

We are a long way from ancient Athens. When a writer appears to keep running around the barn, it is natural enough for a reader to infer that he does not know what he is doing or is himself confused. That inference may be slower in coming, and even seem impious, when the writer is Plato. But even in his case, this reaction may eventually take shape, especially in readers whose view of the power of language differs from his.

Even though they ultimately went about their way apparently unchanged by it, it speaks well for the Athenians that they appear to have taken Plato’s writing seriously at a time when he was not yet Plato.

Not being Plato, I have to content myself with reminding the reader that the assumptions about the power of language that go into impatient reactions to some writing are not obviously true and represent a choice.

The philosophical world is a different place without those assumptions. It calls for a different kind of endeavor, and also for a different approach to conveying or appropriating the fruits of that endeavor when it is successful. What is involved in bringing oneself to understand something in the first place? And what is involved in conveying it effectively to someone else? Why suppose that the only, or even the best, way of accomplishing the latter involves constructing arguments?

To raise that question is not to suggest that arguments are useless because people are mostly irrational. They are not inevitably useless. It is to call attention to the fact that philosophical argument begins its historical career as an instrument of persuasion. It is also to invite the question what there is about the mind that makes it amenable to logical argument when it is. And not thus amenable when it isn’t! Thoughtlessly to roll out argument upon argument when addressing someone who does not respond to arguments substitutes an intellectual mannerism for intelligent behavior. It is a very fashionable mannerism, but then, mannerisms usually are.

There is clearly more to persuasion than argument and logic. And that more is not all dismissible as simply bad or as intellectually inferior practice. There is nothing intrinsically bad about poetic resonance, for example, or about the power of metaphor. Nor is there anything intrinsically bad in the
deliberate use of discontinuity as a way of disarming the power of assumptions that continually get in the way of understanding.

All that being said, the fundamental issue remains unresolved: what did Socrates mean by equating virtue with knowledge, and was he right? And what can language do with respect to that question?

(To be continued)

© A.S. Kappler 2010