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# The Mystery of Socrates' Last Words

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**E**mily Wilson's elegant new book, *The Death of Socrates*, reminds us that a blurry center mars the deceptively familiar tableau of bearded white males, hemlock, tears, and serenity. Socrates' death has always moved us, and Wilson, a classicist at Penn, guides us adroitly through the many twists and turns of this cultural icon's long life. The scene has been reimagined so many times that we almost forget the philosopher's strangely obscure last words.

Athens' ever-curious philosophical gadfly had been tried and convicted by an Athenian court, which condemned him to death for impiety and corrupting the young. As he awaited execution, which would come in the form of a cup of hemlock, a group of his young and despairing followers visited him in his cell. Even the jailer who administered the dose was moved to tears by the great philosopher's composure. He handed the cup to Socrates, who took it cheerfully, asking if he was allowed to pour out the customary libation. No, came the answer, the dose was just enough to get the job done. At that, Socrates offered a simple prayer. Then, "quite calmly and with no sign of distaste, he drained the cup in one breath."

At this point, his followers, who were struggling to maintain their own composure, broke down weeping, and it was Socrates who comforted them and exhorted them to be brave. Socrates walked around for a few minutes, and as his legs began to feel heavy he lay down on his back. Inexorably, he lost feeling in first his feet, then his legs, as the poison's effects worked their way up his body. The jailer told him that when the numbness reached his heart, he would die. It

had reached his waist when Socrates uncovered his face, which he had covered, to address one of his followers: "Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don't forget." Crito answered that it would be done, and asked if there was anything else. No reply. A moment later, Socrates was gone.

This account comes to us by way of Plato's long dialogue *Phaedo*, which purports to be a narrative of Socrates' final hours by one of the followers who was present, Phaedo of Elis, to others who were not. The main body of the work consists of a long and often highly technical conversation between Socrates and his followers about the nature of the soul, which Socrates argues is immortal. His belief in the soul's immortality helps Socrates face death with equanimity.

In contrast with their speaker's serenity, however, those enigmatic last words provoked consternation from the start. Ancient commentators, Emily Wilson tells us, basically threw up their hands, falling back on the idea that Socrates was babbling nonsensically under the influence of the poison. Modern observers, more persistent in demanding meaning from Plato's text, have tended to take the dialogue's content as a clue and treat Socrates' last words as a sort of philosophical puzzle. This line of thinking goes back to Nietzsche, no mean classicist, who argued in *The Gay Science* that "this ridiculous and terrible 'last word' means for those who have ears: 'O Crito, *life is a disease*.'" Asclepius was the Greek god of healing, and offering a cock in sacrifice was a way of thanking him for healing Socrates with the hemlock.

Recent philosophers have found Nietzsche's interpretation unconvincing. To many, it distorts Platonic doctrine to equate life with a disease. Besides, such cynicism seems out of character for Socrates, who, moreover, never gives the slightest indication that he feels he's about to be healed of anything. And so, scholars have suggested new solutions to this 2,400-year-old "riddle" regularly in leading academic journals every five years or so over the last couple of decades: Glenn Most in *Classical Quarterly* in 1993, James

Crooks in the same journal in 1998, and Laurel Madison in *The Journal of the History of Philosophy* in 2002.

They may dispute the details of Nietzsche's interpretation, but these recent explanations share his assumption that Socrates' last words possess a hidden meaning that Plato wants the reader to figure out. A few earlier scholars had questioned this assumption, suggesting that Socrates might be doing what he seems to be doing—asking a simple favor—but were utterly unable to offer a cogent explanation of what exactly he had in mind. As Laurel Madison summarizes the dominant approach, "It is assumed correctly, I think, that Socrates' last words speak volumes about both his and Plato's view of the nature and the task of human existence."

And like most of the other explanations over the years—there's a surprisingly large number—the recent ones further assume that Socrates' request has to do with offering thanks, or with healing, or both. Offering a sacrifice was a common way of thanking a god, and we know of people offering such sacrifices to Asclepius when they'd been cured of an illness.

All this seems straightforward enough, until we try picking apart these theories to see who's thanking Asclepius for what and who's being healed of what. That's when things get complicated. To Glenn Most, Plato wants us to figure out that Socrates' soul is having a clairvoyant vision as it prepares to leave his body, in which he sees Plato, who is not present, being healed of an illness mentioned earlier in the *Phaedo*, and so Socrates is asking Crito to thank Asclepius for healing Plato. To James Crooks, Socrates is making an ironic dig at the Pythagoreans (who saw the cock as a sacred animal) while urging his own followers to thank Asclepius for the philosophical therapy that has safeguarded their intellectual, linguistic, and political hygiene. To Laurel Madison, similarly, Socrates is not only alluding subtly to the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur, which has been discussed earlier in the dialogue, but he's also saying that his friends owe thanks to Asclepius for healing their souls by converting them to philosophy. Most recently, Emily Wilson

in *The Death of Socrates* offers her own explanation, which is that Socrates is comparing death to childbirth, and thus wishes to thank Asclepius for helping with the birth of his soul into the afterlife.

These explanations are intelligent, informed, and creative, and each of them is certainly possible. Yet they can't all be right, and none of them seems on the face of it to be any more plausible than the others. Most tellingly, perhaps, the very fact that there are so many of them suggests that a new approach might be in order.

First of all, note the contortions needed to work in the assumptions of hidden meaning, thanking, and healing, none of which, surprisingly enough, is based on anything in Plato's text as it depicts Socrates' final moments. But these assumptions are not the only possibilities. I think they are red herrings, whose pungent aromas have lured generations of straining philosophical bloodhounds off the scent, deep into dense metaphysical underbrush.

Let's do the obvious, then. Let's look at the scene with fresh eyes, dismissing the assumptions. Since Asclepius seems to point us to the hemlock, we'll start with its arrival. And since the request for a sacrifice implies a religious purpose, we'll look for anything with a religious ring to it. Almost magically, the moment we do that, a piece of the picture that we didn't even notice before snaps sharply into focus. It's big, and it's right there in plain sight, but it's so well camouflaged that it blended into the background. It comes just a few scant paragraphs before Socrates utters his supposedly baffling last words.

Socrates asks to pour a libation, and is told he cannot do so.

In ancient Greece, a person who was about to eat or drink was expected to give up some portion to the gods, especially on an auspicious occasion. For meat, this was the sacrifice, and it usually consisted of burning a less desirable part of the animal, like bones or guts. The gods were thought of as enjoying the smell as it drifted upward, and the humans conveniently got to eat the good bits. For drink, this took the form

of a libation, a small amount poured out on the ground before drinking the remainder. The libation was poured “to” a particular god, whichever one was appropriate to the occasion. When drinking before you march off to fight Spartans, for example, you might pour a libation to Ares, god of war. And when about to quaff a cup of hemlock, a pious ancient Greek who felt like pouring a libation at all in those dire circumstances would likely pour it to . . . yes, as I’ll explain further in a moment, a good candidate would be Asclepius.

The idea behind such a libation, of course, was to appease the god in question, who would then be better disposed toward blessing your venture with a positive outcome. Supplication in hopes of a future favor was just as common a motive for libation and sacrifice as thanks for a favor already bestowed. And supplication—not thanks—is precisely what preoccupies Socrates from the moment the hemlock arrives, if his words are anything to go by. When told he can’t pour the libation, he immediately responds by praying that “my removal from this world to the other may be prosperous,” the same hope that clearly motivated his request to pour a libation. But there’s no reason to think that his prayer could wholly discharge the “debt” he owes for not pouring the libation. If it could, then libations have no point. Why pour your expensive liquid (usually wine) at all when you could just offer up a cheap prayer? I’m not an expert on Greek religion, but I don’t need to be one to deduce that if a prayer could match a libation, then the practice of libation would not have existed.

A closer reading strongly supports this logic. *Manthanô . . . all’ euchesthai ge . . . exesti te kai chrê*, Socrates responds to the jailer’s denial of his request for a libation: “I understand, but at least to pray . . . is what I can and should do . . .” In particular, the use of the enclitic particle *ge* (“at least,” “at any rate”) shows that for Socrates the putative efficacy of the prayer doesn’t equal that of the libation. One says “at least” like this when substituting an inferior measure for a superior one, and it carries the sense that the infe-

rior measure is the best one can do. Another aspect of Socrates' phrasing further underscores the common motivation behind these two acts of piety, since the request to pour the libation has already employed a construction with the word *exesti* ("it is permitted"). An accurate translation that reflects all this might have Socrates first ask if he's *allowed* to pour the libation, and then, when told no, respond: "I understand, but *at least I'm allowed*—and required—to pray . . ."

The prayer, then, picks up on the request in two ways: by extending it logically, and by echoing it verbally. The connection is clear, though translations commonly fail to do it full justice. Equally clear is that Socrates feels enjoined to pray as a second choice, one less sure of bringing about the desired result.

Socrates' only other words after the prayer are when he exhorts his friends to be calm. Then he lies down and covers his face—but, as I would propose, he hasn't forgotten the unpoured libation. This lingering misgiving prompts the request to sacrifice a cock, which we may readily see perfectly meets the deficit. Crito's promise to wipe out the debt of the unpoured libation, then, allows Socrates to die in peace. His "removal" now has the best chance he can give it of being "prosperous." Healing, we'll observe, doesn't enter into it. If Socrates were a New Age guru, this is where he'd tell Nietzsche that it's not about the destination, it's about the journey.

It's true that Socrates, when he asks about the libation, does not specify Asclepius. Instead, he asks to pour a libation "to some god" (the Penguin translation, which just has "pour a libation," glosses over this detail). Then, when told he can't, he offers his prayer "to the gods," again not specifying Asclepius.

But this is entirely to be expected. He needn't have thought of Asclepius at this early point. Indeed, Asclepius is not an obvious choice at first glance, since hemlock is a deadly poison. But think about it (as Socrates did). Who is likely to have presided over the measuring of this carefully

calibrated dose, which we've just learned is precisely enough to kill a healthy adult male, no more, no less? Greece during Socrates' lifetime was a place in which the medical profession was enjoying explosive growth and newfound public importance. Even if a doctor didn't pour the dose out himself, somewhere along the line there was almost certainly a doctor involved both in preparing the hemlock and in calibrating the dose. And we know that Greek physicians used hemlock in smaller doses for medicinal purposes; in the *Phaedo*, Plato calls it *to pharmakon*, "the medicine." Asclepius was the god not only of healing but also, and more specifically, of medicine and doctors. As a medicine, hemlock would have come under his "jurisdiction."

So let me sum up the thought process I think Socrates went through. His first reaction to the hemlock is immediate, reflexive—oh, it's a drink, I ought to pour a libation "to some god" so that what I'm about to do will go smoothly. Then, when thwarted in that, he offers a prayer to the gods in general with the same hope. But simple logic tells us that a prayer can't match a libation. In thinking the situation over, all Socrates has to do is ask himself a question: who's behind the dose? A moment's reflection brings him to Asclepius, to whom he still owes a debt. Systematic thinking takes him there almost inevitably. Systematic thinking prompted by a trenchant question—the specialty of the house, after all. This explains the short delay in settling on Asclepius. His quiet return to the problem after the interruption of his friends' outburst also exemplifies Socrates' characteristic persistence.

Since my explanation comes from observing the scene, it makes better literary sense within the context of the scene. It unifies Socrates' last moments, highlighting the humble, assiduous piety that led him to request the libation and offer the prayer, tying his last words back to those other pious acts of a moment earlier. It gives the scene a thematic arc, a direct line from which Socrates is only momentarily diverted by the need to comfort his friends.

In contrast, the other interpretations fracture the scene of

Socrates' death into senseless shards: one minute he's praying, the next he's posing an arcane riddle. Moreover, they paint Socrates as focused—at the moment of truth, no less—on the very sort of thing for which the Athenians had condemned him. A Socrates who leaves the world spouting an obscure, esoteric puzzle flirts with legitimizing his own condemnation; a Socrates who leaves the world with a sincere gesture of plain old conventional piety pointedly undercuts it, surely a more satisfactory outcome from a literary standpoint.

In the end, there's more at stake than just the meaning of a few words. How we interpret Socrates' last words reveals what we think of Socrates himself. The most conspicuous issue to do with the libation in this regard involves what scholars call the irony question. Is Socrates really as humble and plain-spoken as he purports to be, or is all that modesty merely a rhetorical pose, a veil for something less attractive? Certainly there are many passages in which Socrates appears to employ an essentially ironic technique, though that interpretation has been disputed and this isn't the place to discuss it. But if he was being ironic in asking to pour a libation, my explanation might seem to be in trouble. Socrates, that argument might go, is really waggling his eyebrows: "Hey, mind if I pour a generous libation from this glass of deadly poison you've just handed me?" I don't believe that's what he's doing, personally. It doesn't seem to fit the tone of the occasion, for one thing. I also think the whole irony question, at least as it's often framed, risks presupposing a false dichotomy, that Socrates is definitively either this or that, not a jumble of poses and sincerity and other messy impulses like the rest of us. Irony and earnestness can coexist quite happily in the conversational style of sophisticated people, and I'm quite willing to stipulate a twinkle in Socrates' eye as he makes what might still be intended as a serious request.

Again, a closer reading illustrates the point. The Greek itself is ambiguous, and seems to leave room for at least some irony. Socrates, we are told, makes the request for a libation *hōsper eiōthei taurêdon hypoblepsas pros ton anthropon*, lit-

erally “looking up from under at the man, as was his habit, like a bull.” Liddell and Scott cite this passage and another in offering “look mischievously” as one definition of the verb *hypoblepô*, “look from under [the brows],” but elsewhere it simply means to look askance or simply to glance. It’s easy to imagine a slightly lowered head, raised (if not waggled) eyebrows, and the previously stipulated twinkle accompanying the request, if indeed Liddell and Scott have it right. Most translators, however, offer a straight version.

Yet despite the ambiguous language, one thing is clear. The request for a libation cannot be entirely ironic without rendering the prayer that follows it also entirely ironic. They are that closely linked. And if the request for a libation and the prayer are entirely ironic, why not the request for a sacrifice that follows so closely?

So it doesn’t really matter how we answer the irony question. However we read these three acts of apparent piety—as ironic, as sincere, or as a mix of both—the relevant point is that irony does nothing to disconnect them. And it’s primarily the connection that I’m arguing for, not the degree of earnestness.

Beneath the irony question lies the deeper issue of Socrates’ personality. It’s likely that some experts will find my explanation unbecomingly simple. Compare the Socrates they’d like us to believe in with the Socrates of Michel de Montaigne, who in his essays praises the Athenian philosopher as embodying simplicity. “Socrates moves close to the ground,” Montaigne writes, “and, at a gentle and ordinary pace, discourses on the most useful subjects; and, when confronted with death and the thorniest obstacles he could meet with, he follows the ordinary course of human life.” Montaigne’s Socrates, at least, doesn’t speak in riddles. He speaks plainly, and he acts in the everyday world.

This may be a matter of taste, but I find Montaigne’s reading of Plato more grounded than that of the modern academics, whose conception of the philosopher as an abstruse riddler comes alarmingly close to the airy-fairy Socrates lam-

pooned so effectively by Aristophanes in *The Clouds*. Socrates himself, in the *Apology*, mentions the damage done to his reputation by Aristophanes' portrayal of him, and he decisively repudiates the poet's characterization. He also affirms his habit of speaking plainly, and implies that his words have often been overinterpreted.

Glenn Most reminds us that Socrates was a famous person whose last words were unlikely to have been easily fictionalized. In arguing that Plato means us to think Socrates is having a clairvoyant vision, Most speculates that Plato himself may not have understood Socrates' last words, and that the supposed vision was Plato's attempt to give them meaning for the reader. If so, it seems rather a lame effort. Surely Plato might have made it clearer.

One possibility is that the meaning of Socrates' words would have been so plain to his pagan contemporaries that no explanation of them was considered necessary. In that case, perhaps, it was only later, with Neoplatonic and Christian commentators from whom the living pagan context had bled away, that the words came to be seen as a puzzle.

But the idea that Plato himself didn't grasp the words is intriguing. Is it possible, in fact, that no one has ever understood what Socrates meant?

Glenn Most thinks so, and asserts further that "even if we can be fairly sure that Socrates actually said these words, we must acknowledge that what he may have meant by them is quite unrecoverable." I respectfully disagree. If the last words were well enough known to preclude fictionalizing, as indeed seems likely, then so were the few minutes leading up to them, including the request to pour a libation. My explanation recovers the historical Socrates every bit as satisfactorily as it interprets the literary one. As far as I have been able to determine, no one has yet drawn any connection between the request for a sacrifice and the request for a libation that precedes it by just a few lines. Yet the logic of the scene cries out for the connection to be made. Better late than never.

So plain meaning, not hidden meaning. Supplication, not

thanks. Medicine, not healing. These are not arbitrary or speculative choices. Each is closely anchored to what Plato shows us Socrates actually doing in the real world as he faces death—asking a favor, supplicating the gods, drinking a medicine. This is what distinguishes my explanation from the others: it follows (dare I say inevitably?) from a decision to look first for answers in the scene in which the action takes place, and to do so methodically, before going further afield. Naturally, as with any utterance, we may project hidden meaning onto Socrates' words—or suggest that he intended to give thanks as well as to supplicate, or assume that some aspect of healing must be implicated. But such speculation is not supported by anything in the text of the scene itself. I'd argue that my explanation now makes it unnecessary, although—call me irresponsible!—something tells me that the temptation will remain a strong one.

Aside from Nietzsche's red herrings, perhaps one reason why no one picked up on the libation before is that Socrates himself grabs all our attention. The drinking of the hemlock, the subsequent discomfiture of Socrates' friends, Socrates' attempt to calm them, and not least his death itself—these dramatic, emotionally charged events distract us. So we don't notice that they interrupt the appearance, in quick succession, of the three main types of Greek religious ritual. Clearly, though, once we do notice that libation, prayer, and sacrifice all appear within a few moments of each other, it's at least a stretch to suppose that two of them share a common yet unfulfilled purpose while the third stands apart—although it lacks any other clear motivation, seems perfectly consistent with the stated purpose of the first two, and even fulfills that purpose admirably.

If I'm right, we finally have an idea of what was going through Socrates' mind as death approached, and it's characteristically unruffled and down-to-earth. He's improvising but he stays focused, intent literally to his last breath on his trademark goal of living—and dying—well. My explanation shows Socrates wholly committed to leaving this world im-

peccably, but within the context of his culture and its religious values. Only by relating his last words to that context can we at last unlock for ourselves the full meaning of his death—which turns out to be both less and more than his modern successors would have us believe.