

## THE LAST WORDS OF SOCRATES

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An understanding of Socrates' last words may perhaps be attempted by considering the larger question of his relationship to Orphism and Pythagoreanism <sup>1</sup>. It may be possible to shed some light on this enigmatic utterance through an examination of the nature and function of Asklepios and his cult.

The character of Asklepios is multifaceted. He is not merely the preserver of health, but also the reviver of the dead. These constitute some of the significant elements of his office.

While I agree in the main with Minadeo's thesis that Socrates meant his final statement in the spirit of piety <sup>2</sup>, I do not accept his conclusion that this vitiates the standard interpretation. If we take Socrates literally to be acknowledging a debt for a long life of good health, as Minadeo suggests, it does not follow that he is necessarily praising the body. What more fitting time could there be to fulfill a life long obligation to the god than at the point of death? To have paid such a debt earlier would have seemed presumptuous and premature. Therefore it was no oversight, as some maintain, that he should pronounce these words only before dying. They were by no means intended to be mocking or impious, but were a final example of Socratic irony, as the Edelsteins suggest <sup>3</sup>.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the *P h a e d o* is its uncompromising dualism. Socrates is depicted as finding the life of the body and that of the soul to be basically incompatible and of unequal value. (67—C) Earthly existence is considered as a form of punishment necessary to expiate the inherent impurity of the body <sup>4</sup>. In accordance with Orphic views Socrates defends this dichotomy. Purgation is needed to free the soul from the pollution of matter. Although the soul is seen as existing independently of the body, it is, in effect, the body's prisoner. Philosophy as a form of purification is the method of freeing the soul from its fetters. *But the pure souls who have purified themselves by philosophy live henceforth altogether without bodies and pass to still more beautiful abodes.* (114—C).

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1) A. E. Taylor, *Varia Socratica*, (Oxford : James Parker and Co., 1911), p. 17.

2) Richard Minadeo, «Socrates' Debt to Asclepius», *The Classical Journal*, LXXVI (1971), 295—297.

3) Emma and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius : A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (2 vols. ; Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins Press, 1945), II, 131.

4) W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, (London : Methuen & Co., 1935), p. 165.

A cursory examination of the legends attached to Asklepios' origins also reveal that he is a resurrected god. Like Dionysos he has attained Olympian stature through adoption. Ovid's version states that he was killed by Jupiter as a god. But beneath that late formulation lies the earlier symbolization of dying as a mortal and being reborn as a god. He is killed for the impiety of reviving the dead, as Aeschylus in *Agamemnon* writes,

*Healer of all, Asclepius. Lord Paean  
softening the painful sufferings of men's  
diseases, giver of gentle gifts, mighty  
one, may you come bringing health and  
checking illnesses and the harsh fate  
of death. O youth who promote growth  
and ward off evil, youth of happy fate,  
mighty scion of Phoebus Apollo, splendidly  
honored, enemy of diseases, having as  
your wife faultless Hygieia, come blessed  
one, savior, granting a good end to life* <sup>5</sup>.

The object lesson of Asklepios' death as a *pharmakos* and subsequent rebirth as a god was no doubt not lost on Socrates. To die, then, is no catastrophe if one is to be reborn - deified.

Minadeo asks, «What, for instance, does Asclepius have to do with healing one of the body by means of death? Nothing I think.» To the contrary I suggest that the transcendental role of Asklepios is clearly evident. That Socrates chose this time to repay his debt to the deity who revives the dead is then not as paradoxical as it may first appear. Although a Socratic irony, it is neither impious nor inconsistent.

The standard interpretation that Socrates was expressing gratitude to the god for healing him of the malady of the body finds support from the fact that it was customary to make an offering of a cock to Asklepios upon recovering from an illness. But of what illness was Socrates, at this point, cured? According to the doctrines expressed in the dialogue: of the illness of life itself.

Although one cannot rule out the possibility that Socrates was expressing his gratitude for a long life of exceptional health and that, since the afterlife is disencumbered of the body it is fitting to pay tribute to the deity in whose care this earthly shell has been, it would seem more in keeping with the Orphic tenor of the *Phaedo* that the debt was to his physician for lifelong treatment of an illness now finally cured by dying. In support of this contention is the oft-stated doctrine that philosophy is the practice of death. (82—A).

If we accept Asklepios as the reviver of the dead, we can easily substantiate

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5) Edelstein, *op. cit.*, I, 334—335.

this interpretation through the Socratic equation that life is death and its converse. In his role as the reviver of the dead Asklepios is the Grand Master who initiates the adept into the mysteries of the beyond and eternal health.

Whatever the construction may be placed upon this final utterance this much is clear ; Socrates in no way felt that something terrible was about to befall him.

The *therapia* of the god, then, was to bring him to a good end and smooth his path into the next world. Since the Socratic idea is that philosophy is a dying to this world, the paradox follows that true health is synonymous with death.

*Therapia* as the service one renders to the gods is analogous to Socrates' ministry to the youth of Athens. As a *therapon* Socrates carried out his duties to his god (Apollo—Asklepios) through his practice of philosophy. As the self-appointed physician of Athens he attempted to purge the city of wrongmindedness. In this manner the saving character of Asklepios is carried to its acme in Socrates' mission : his midwifery of the Athenian elite <sup>6</sup>. Socrates is himself both the sorcerer and the poisoner of youth. Thus the charge brought against him of corrupting youth is among other things one of malpractice. It is, therefore, appropriate that he should suffer the fate of a poisoner, namely to die of poison himself.

In keeping with the idea of purification it should be noted that Socrates' frequent states of ecstasy had much in common with Orphic notions of *katharsis* as a perfect passing <sup>7</sup>. These states are described by Plato as a form of death. Again it is brought to our attention that the notion of purification is akin to that of dying and in consequence also applies to Asklepios. One might also venture to speculate that Socrates' demon is a visitation of Asklepios himself, similar to that experienced by the patients during their incubation at the Asklepia.

Vital to the understanding of purification is the role of music. It is hence not strange that we find Socrates engaged in writing hymns to Apollo on the last day of his life. For apart from its purgative function in Orphism and in the therapeutic practices in the temples of Asklepios, one finds in Plato's *Ion* (530—A) a reference to contests held in honor of Asklepios which consisted of the writing of rhapsodies. Socrates' activity in honoring Apollo is thus notably similar to such an offering made to Asklepios <sup>8</sup>. At the Asklepia it was customary to greet the god twice daily with song, in the morning and at evening.

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6) It is instructive to keep in mind Socrates' injunction to Simmias and Cebes (78—A) to find a charmer. Equally the reference in our quotation from *Agamemnon* mentions *charming spells*. Now the point here is that these are all bound to the notion of purification.

7) Vittorio D. Macchioro, *From Orpheus to Paul : A History of Orphism* (New York : Henry Holt & Co., 1930), p. 12.

8) Edelstein, *op. cit.*, II, 199.

The similarity between Asklepios and Apollo becomes clear when one considers that they were both patron dieties of philosophy as well as of healing and of the arts.

In view of this, while the last words of Socrates may still be considered ironic, they may well be interpreted in thr light of his adherence to Orphic and Pythagorean notions of purification and the immortality of the soul.

## Π Ε Ρ Ι Λ Η Ψ Ι Σ

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Τὸ ἄρθρον τοῦτο σκοπεῖ εἰς ἀνασκευὴν νεωτεριζουσῶν ἐρμηνειῶν τῶν τελευταίων λόγων τοῦ Σωκράτους «ὀφείλομεν τῷ Ἀσκληπιῷ ἀλεκτρυόνα», διατυπωθεισῶν ὑπὸ συγγραφέων τινῶν ἐν Ἀμερικῇ. Κατὰ μίαν ἐρμηνείαν οἱ τελευταῖοι λόγοι τοῦ Σωκράτους ἔχουν τὴν ἔννοιαν ἐκφράσεως εὐχαριστιῶν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν τῆς υγείας καὶ τῆς ζωῆς, διότι παρέσχεν εἰς τὸν Σωκράτη βίον μακρὸν καὶ ἀπηλλαγμένον νόσων. Μόνον ὅτι αἱ εὐχαριστίαι διὰ τὴν προστασίαν τοῦ σώματος ἐκφέρονται ἀκριβῶς τὴν στιγμήν ὅτε ἡ προστασία αὐτὴ ἀποτόμως αἴρεται διὰ τοῦ βιαίου θανάτου. Κατ' ἄλλην ἐρμηνείαν αἱ εὐχαριστίαι ὑπὸ τὰς συνθήκας ταύτας ἀποτελοῦν εἰδὸς τι Σωκρατικῆς εἰρωνείας.

Ὁ συγγραφεὺς ἐχόμενος τῆς κατὰ παράδοσιν ἐρμηνείας ὑποστηρίζει ὅτι πρὸς ὀρθὴν ἐρμηνείαν ὀφείλομεν νὰ λάβωμεν ὑπ' ὄψει ὅτι ὁ Ἀσκληπιὸς δὲν εἶναι μόνον ὁ προστάτης τῆς υγείας, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁ ἐπαναφέρων τοὺς νεκροὺς εἰς τὴν ζωὴν, ἀποθανῶν ὁ ἰδιὸς ποτε ὡς ἄνθρωπος καὶ ἀναστηθεὶς ὡς θεός. Ἐξ ἄλλου, ὡς ἐκ τοῦ ὅλου διαλόγου τοῦ Φαίδωνος γίνεται φανερόν, ὁ Σωκράτης ὑπὸ τὴν ἐπίδρασιν Ὀρφικῶν καὶ Πυθαγορείων ἀντιλήψεων πιστεύει ὅτι ἡ ζωὴ ἀποτελεῖ εἰδὸς τι θανάτου, ἔνεκα τῶν δεσμῶν τῆς ψυχῆς ἐγκλειομένης ἐντὸς τοῦ σώματος. Ὁ φιλόσοφος διὰ τοῦ φιλοσοφικοῦ βίου παρεσκευάσεν ἑαυτὸν καταλλήλως ὥστε διὰ τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ σώματος νὰ ἀπαλλάξῃ τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπὸ τὴν νόσον τῆς ἐπιγείου ζωῆς, ἥτις τοιοιτοτρόπως ἀνακτᾷ τὴν ἐλευθερίαν τῆς διὰ τὴν μεταθανάτιον περιόδου. Ὑπὸ τὴν ἔννοιαν ταύτην ὁ Σωκράτης ἀποθνήσκων ἀπαλλάσσεται τῆς νόσου τοῦ βίου καὶ γίνεται υγιὴς μὲ τὴν ψυχὴν κεκαθαρμένην. Διὰ τὴν κάθαρσιν ἀκριβῶς ταύτην καὶ τὴν ἀνάκτησιν τῆς υγείας τῆς ψυχῆς του ὁ Σωκράτης εὐχαριστεῖ τὸν Ἀσκληπιόν.