The Eleventh Annual Plantinga Fellow Lecture

THE DEATH OF SOCRATES

Kathrin Koslicki
Associate Professor of Philosophy
University of Colorado, Boulder

In 399 B.C., when Socrates was 70 years old, he was brought to trial on the charge of impiety and sentenced to death by a jury consisting of 500 Athenian citizens. Many questions persist today concerning the circumstances of Socrates’ trial and execution, his life, and the substance of his philosophical views. Professor Koslicki will investigate some of these questions—and offer a glimpse of how one might answer them.

Discussion and reception to follow.
All students, faculty, and staff are welcome.

Eck Visitors’ Center Auditorium

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3 P.M.

574.631.7339
cpreligion@nd.edu
philreligion.nd.edu
Socrates’ Death

• In 399 BC, when Socrates was 70 years old, he was brought to trial on the charge of impiety, convicted by an Athenian jury consisting of 500 jurors and sentenced to death.
• Socrates refused to escape from prison, even though he was given the opportunity to do so.
• Socrates died in prison one month after his trial by drinking hemlock.
Some Questions about Socrates’ Death

• Why was Socrates brought to trial?
• Why did the jurors find Socrates guilty?
• Why did Socrates refuse to escape from prison?
• Is the official charge of impiety itself sufficient to explain Socrates’ death?
• Or were the real reasons for Socrates’ death political?
• Was it *reasonable* for an Athenian juror in 399 BC to conclude that Socrates deserved to die?
• To what extent should Socrates himself be held to be responsible for his own death?
• What should *our* attitude be towards the events surrounding Socrates’ death?
Three Interpretations

(1) “Death Wish”: Socrates died because he wanted to die.

(2) The Moral/Religious Interpretation: the official impiety charge was not trumped up; Socrates’ accusers really found his moral and/or religious views objectionable.

(3) The Political Interpretation: the official impiety charge was trumped up; the real reasons for Socrates’ death were political.
“But the more I fell in love with the Greeks, the more agonizing grew the spectacle of Socrates before his judges. It horrified me as a civil libertarian. It shook my Jeffersonian faith in the common man. It was a black mark for Athens and the freedom it symbolized. How could the trial of Socrates have happened in so free a society? How could Athens have been so untrue to itself?”
Some Basic Facts About Socrates’ Life

- Socrates was born in 469 BC.
- Socrates’ father, Sophroniscus, a stone-mason; his mother, Phaenarete, a midwife.
- Married to Xanthippe and had three sons, Lamprocles, Sophroniscus and Menexenus.
Some Basic Tenets of Socratic Philosophy

• Socratic questions: What is piety? What is courage? ...
• Disavowal of knowledge: Socrates himself claims to know only that he knows nothing.
• Socratic dialogues end in *aporia*. 
Some Basic Tenets of Socratic Philosophy

• Virtue is wisdom, knowledge of what is good and bad.
• Unity of virtue: “Piety”, “justice”, “courage”, “temperance”, etc. are just names for a single thing, virtue (i.e., knowledge of what is good and bad).
• No one does wrong willingly or knowingly.
• Justice as psychic health: it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it.
The official charge was impiety.

Socrates, according to his official accusers, behaved impietiously in the following three ways:

(i) by not respecting the gods of the city;
(ii) by inventing new divinities; and
(iii) by corrupting the young.
Socrates’ Accusers

• Socrates’ accusers were Meletus, Anytus and Lycon.
• All three of them appear as characters in some of Plato’s dialogues.
• Meletus, apparently still a young man at the time of Socrates’ trial, acted as the prosecutor in Socrates’ case.
• Anytus and Lycon assisted him in presenting Socrates’ case.
The Trial

• Socrates was brought to trial before a jury of 500 Athenian jurors.
• First vote (“guilty or not guilty”): 280 jurors found Socrates to be guilty of the charges and 220 not guilty.
• If 30 jurors had voted differently, Socrates would have been acquitted.
• Second vote: apparently by a much wider margin in favor of penalty proposed by prosecution.
The Penalty

• The Penalty proposed by the prosecution: death.
• Counterpenalty proposed by Socrates – controversial:
  • None.
  • To be treated like an Olympic hero for the rest of his life.
  • A fee of 30 minas of silver.
Socrates’ Defense

• Accounts of what Socrates might have said at the trial in his own defense vary.
• Broad consensus: the manner in which Socrates conducted himself at the trial would have been found to be arrogant and provocative by the jurors.
• Plato and Xenophon each wrote an Apology to defend Socrates against the charges on which he was brought up.
• Some of the later accounts (e.g., the Greek orator Libanius, 314-393 C.E.) claim that he said nothing at all.
Refusal to Escape from Prison

• According to Plato’s dialogue, *Crito*, Socrates’ friends had arranged for him to escape from prison and go into exile.

• But Socrates refused to escape on the following grounds:
  “You must either persuade it [the constitution of Athens] or obey its orders and endure in silence whatever it instructs you to endure, whether blows or bonds, and if it leads you into war to be wounded or killed, you must obey.” (*Crito*, 51b)
Socrates’ Death

• Plato’s dialogue, Phaedo, ends with a moving death scene, in which Socrates drinks the hemlock.
• He is cheerful in the face of death, while his friends and family lose all composure.
  “...there is good hope that death is a blessing” (Apology, 40c)
The Political Interpretation

- The official impiety charge was trumped up; the real reasons for Socrates’ death were political.
- Socrates’ alleged political leanings:
  - Either (A): Socrates was *in fact* anti-democratic, pro-oligarchic, pro-Spartan.
  - Or (B): Socrates was *perceived* as posing a threat against the Athenian democracy.
The Political Interpretation

• Two recent overthrows of Athenian democracy:
  • The Four Hundred (411 B.C.)
  • The Thirty Tyrants (404 B.C.)

• Amnesty: Socrates could not be brought up on explicitly political charges.
The Political Interpretation

• Corrupting the Young -- Association with known trouble-makers: Alcibiades, Critias, Charmides.
• Critias and Charmides were involved in the overthrow of the democracy during the Thirty.
• Alcibiades several times defected to Athens’ enemies.
• In Plato’s *Symposium*, Alcibiades is portrayed as Socrates’ lover.
ΑΛΚΙΒΙΑΔΗΣ ΚΛΙΝΙΟΥ ΑΘΗΝΑΙΟΣ
Contra Political Interpretation (A)  
But Not (B)

- Socrates himself did not subscribe to a positive political philosophy: he was neither explicitly democratic nor explicitly anti-democratic.
- “Rule by the one who knows”: not an endorsement of oligarchy.
- The Socratic mission: establishing the preconditions for expertise in ruling -- moral virtue (i.e., knowledge of the good and bad).
“So I think it is by knowledge that one ought to make decisions, if one is to make them well, and not by majority rule. [...] So in this present case it is also necessary to investigate first of all whether any one of us is an expert in the subject we are debating, or not. And if one of us is, then we should listen to him even if he is only one, and disregard the others.” (Laches, 184e-185a)
Democrat, Oligarch or Neither?

- Pro-democracy? The *Crito* focuses on the implicit agreement Socrates has entered, not the content of the laws.
- Anti-democracy? No one in fact has the knowledge required to be an expert ruler.
- Neither!
“This is how they proceed in matters which they consider technical [they only listen to the expert]. But when it is a matter of deliberating on city management, anyone can stand up and advise them, carpenter, blacksmith, shoemaker, merchant, ship-captain, rich man, poor man, well-born, low-born – it doesn’t matter – and nobody blasts him for presuming to give counsel without any prior training under a teacher. The reason for this is clear: They do not think that this can be taught. Public life aside, the same principle also holds in private life, where the wisest and best of our citizens are unable to transmit to others the virtues that they possess. Look at Pericles, the father of these young men here...” [Protagoras, 319d-e]
The Majority vs. The Expert(s)

- Critique of how political decisions were actually made.
- Athenians had the wrong priorities: they were obsessed with pleasure, buildings, theater productions, wars, wealth, honor, and the like.
- Sparta as a haven for free thinkers? (Protagoras, 342a ff)
- No restriction on the number of rulers, as long as they are experts.
Socrates the Moral Skeptic?

• Important first step: to clear away the *illusion* of knowledge.
• Ambitious and substantive philosophical commitments:
  • Virtue is wisdom, knowledge of what is good and bad.
  • Unity of virtue: “Piety”, “justice”, “courage”, “temperance”, etc. are just names for a single thing, virtue (i.e., knowledge of what is good and bad).
  • No one does wrong willingly or knowingly.
  • Justice as psychic health: it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it.
• Virtue is a craft [*techne*] and therefore teachable: it is difficult to learn, but not impossible.
“Finally I went to the craftsmen, for I was conscious of knowing practically nothing, and I knew that I would find that they had knowledge of many fine things. In this I was not mistaken; they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, gentlemen of the jury, the good craftsmen seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets: each of them, because of his success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had, so that I asked myself, on behalf of the oracle, whether I should prefer to be as I am, with neither their wisdom nor their ignorance, or to have both. The answer I gave myself and the oracle was that it was to my advantage to be as I am.” [Apology, 22c-e]
The Main and Most General Question

- Why was Socrates brought to trial in 399 BC on the charge of impiety, when he was 70 years old, and sentenced to death by a jury consisting of 500 (or 501) Athenian citizens?
The Political Interpretation

- The official impiety charge was trumped up; the real reasons for Socrates’ death were political.
  - (A): Socrates was in fact anti-democratic, pro-oligarchic, pro-Spartan.
  - (B): Socrates was perceived as posing a threat against the Athenian democracy.
The Platonic Socrates

- Plato in the early dialogues does not portray Socrates as subscribing to a positive political philosophy.
- The Socratic mission: aimed at establishing the preconditions for expertise in ruling – moral virtue (knowledge of what is good and bad).
Did Socrates Deserve to Die?

• Was it *reasonable* for an Athenian juror in 399 BC to conclude that Socrates deserved to die?
• What should *our* attitude be towards the events surrounding Socrates’ death?
Conclusion:

- Based on the evidence considered: it was perhaps *understandable*, but not *reasonable*, that the Athenians panicked and wanted Socrates gone.