

Study Guide IIc – Socrates

LART602

Spring, 2012

Prof. Oakes

The Search for Order: The Rational Eye

II. The Greeks

c. Socrates

For Class, Tuesday, 9/3/13:

A. Readings

Plato: *Apology*¹ [*Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy (RAGP)*, pp. 153-178]

Plato: *Euthyphro*² [*RAGP* 135-152]

Plato: *Republic*, Book I³ [*RAGP* 369-397]

B. Discussion Questions

1. To what extent is the world a cosmos (rational order) for Socrates? What *logoi* does (or would) Socrates identify as cosmologically basic or primary?
2. What is Socrates' view of human knowledge? What sorts of things does Socrates believe that we can/not know?
3. What role does religious belief play in Socrates' view of things, if any?
4. Is Socrates honest and guileless or ironical and predatory?
5. Are Socrates' views on wisdom and virtue consistent?

Our question remains the nature of the world order in respect of rationalism. We have seen the origin of philosophy in the West in the work of the pre-Socratics. This movement matures with the thought of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Socrates represents the dividing line between nascent and mature philosophy, owing partly perhaps to the fuller record we have of Socrates than of his predecessors. He deploys sophisticated argumentative techniques in the pursuit of complex and subtle rational constructs. The methods of reasoning have reached a pinnacle in Socrates, and his views are highly evolved and far-reaching.

Socrates' primary vision is of a morally ordered universe. In his investigations of his fellow citizens, he seeks the *arche* or rational principle defining one or another of the human moral virtues. He conceives of these principles as ideas or ideals, *eidōs* (*eidia*, pl.), whose presence in the given act confers on it its moral quality: courage is that ideal entity that makes an act courageous; piety is what makes the pious pious. There is system to this moral logic, too, for Socrates, as is revealed in his conception of propriety: a lesser man cannot harm a better, in his morally ordered universe.

¹ Plato's *Apology* may be found here:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0170%3Atext%3DApol.>

² Plato's *Euthyphro* may be found here:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0170%3Atext%3DEuthyph.>

³ Plato's *Republic* may be found here:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0168>

Ironically – and there are many ironies in Socrates’ thought and action – it is unclear to what extent Socrates believes that we can know moral truth. The moral *eidos* that he pursues seems always to elude our grasp, appropriate to our intellectual grasp though it may be. By contrast with such “superhuman” wisdom, human wisdom for Socrates consists in our recognition of our moral ignorance, our failure to grasp the moral *eidos*. This raises questions about the knowability of the moral order, as conceived by Socrates, questions that would lead Plato, his intellectual heir, to a more daring theory of the moral universe.

Socrates himself left no written record of his thoughts. We receive our picture of Socrates primarily from Plato, one of Socrates’ most ardent followers. Socrates was evidently a man of great moral conviction who challenged public figures in Athens at a time of political instability. Socrates’ courage and convictions ultimately led to his prosecution and death, securing his fame and the infamy of the Athenian assembly that executed him. Socrates’ views on both morality and the cosmos generally represent an important step in the Western intellectual tradition, and were an important influence on Plato, as we shall see.

The two dialogues, *Apology* and *Euthyphro* derive from Plato’s “early period,” in which, scholars agree, Plato’s intent is a faithful representation of Socrates’ methods and views. By the time of the *Republic*, however, Plato is in his “middle period,” developing his own views and distancing himself from some of Socrates’. Although Plato retains use of Socrates as the central character in the dialogue, the views expressed by that character are generally thought to be those of Plato himself. The exception to this is Book I of *Republic*, in which we see Plato depict Socrates at his work; part of the effect of this, however, is dissatisfaction, setting the stage for Plato’s more assertive methods.

Note on Plato Citations:

Plato’s works are cited by reference to *Stephanus numbers*, owing to the type-setting of a 16th Century French printer, Henri Estienne. These numbers will be found in the margins of our text. *Apology*, thus, begins at 17a (see p. 153). In-text citation of Plato’s works should appear as follows: (*Apology* 17a). Where the context has been made clear and to facilitate repeated citations, you may cite simply line numbers: (17a). See further instances below and throughout my notes.

(See also further notes on Socrates on our web-page.)

Apology

6. What is the significance of the Delphic oracle’s message to Socrates?
7. How does the wisdom of the gods differ from ours, on Socrates’ view?
8. What is Socrates’ “daimon” and what role does it play in his thought and action?
9. Why does Socrates believe that the unexamined life is not worth living?
10. Why does Socrates believe that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it?
Why can the lesser man not harm the better?

Euthyphro

11. Does Euthyphro know what piety is?

12. What are we to take from Socrates' examination of Euthyphro's beliefs? What exactly is Socrates looking for and what does this tell us about his views on cosmos?
13. Is piety that which is loved by the gods, or do the gods love that which is pious? (Why is this an intellectual puzzle, if at all?)

Republic I

14. What is Plato's attitude towards Socrates' method and results?
15. What is the significance of Socrates' exchanges with Cephalus and Polemarchus?
16. What is the significance of Socrates' exchange with Thrasymachus?