

# Foundations, Philosophy, and The Location of Socrates' Feet.

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The following discussion attempts to make several interrelated points. The first is to offer an interpretation of a line in Plato's *Phaedo* as a response to Aristophanes' conservative view, i.e., philosophy undermines traditional views of reality and, *a fortiori*, of morality, politics, and esthetics as well. The second is that the line is doubly ironic such that the second turn of the irony is Plato's reply to the ancient liberal view as represented by the Sophists—the view that reality, morality, and esthetics are solely matters of opinion and politics solely a matter of power since transcendent points of reference are impossible. Protagoras' dictum that “man is the measure: of the things that are that they are; of the things that are not that they are not” means that only immanence is possible. This is to say more specifically that truth and falsity cannot be known only opinions possessed; goodness and badness cannot be achieved only pleasures and pains can be; unity and sameness do not exist only multiplicity and difference; justice and injustice are not possible only the interests of the strong and the weak; beauty and ugliness cannot be discovered only likes and dislikes.

The third point is a reply to the contemporary sophists, i.e., the anti-foundationalists or contemporary liberals. They, in order to affirm humanity and the human things, maintain that foundations do not exist and philosophy, as the attempt to uncover them, is either futile at worst or poetry at best.

The argument that foundations do not exist and that philosophy is futile is self-contradictory. The argument that philosophy is just poetry, and bad poetry at that, is Nietzsche's view. But, unlike his liberal epigoni who are positive and optimistic about humanity, Nietzsche follows his argument of philosophy as poetry to its logical conclusion—to a negative and pessimistic humanism.

One important source for his argument is his interpretation of the *Phaedo*—an argument and interpretation with which those offered herein are in conflict.<sup>1</sup> That conflict will be treated at the end of this discussion wherein the true understanding and limits of humanity are disclosed most radically and most fundamentally in philosophy's search for a foundation.

In a remark near the beginning of the *Phaedo* (61d) that is arresting and slyly cryptic, Plato seems to make a joke about philosophy. Given its immediate context, it has an evident and not especially profound meaning. But it is its very obviousness that naggingly draws the curious reader beyond its surface

triviality into the theme and core of the dialogue, namely, the relationship between philosophy, the soul, and mortality. What is more, the sentence recollects others in the *Apology*. It may be that Plato is having a joke at the expense of Socrates, or even more interestingly, employing his irrepressible irony to make a joke about philosophy itself.<sup>2</sup> But the point—the connection, the joke, the irony—cannot be grasped unless and until the reader understands that the sentence is a response to Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates in *The Clouds*—a portrayal addressed by Plato in the *Apology*. In the play Socrates is the character who, suspended in a basket in the air, represents for Aristophanes, the corruption of Athenian religion and morality by means of scientific speculation and sophistry. This is to say that the gods are replaced by natural phenomena in the explanation of things and that traditional morality is challenged and undermined by clever, subtle though specious arguments. The young man, Pheidippides, by the end of the play denies the existence of the gods, beats his father, Strepsiades, and argues, moreover, that his parents deserve to be beaten.

In the *Apology*, Plato treats the character of Socrates in *The Clouds* as a caricature and alludes to it as his own Socratic character gives his first speech before his Athenian judges recalling the underlying bias against him.

Socrates is guilty of criminal meddling, in that he inquires into things below the earth and in the sky, and makes the weaker argument defeat the stronger and teaches others to follow his example. It runs something like that. You have seen it for yourselves in the play by Aristophanes, where Socrates goes whirling round, proclaiming that he is walking on air, and uttering a great deal of nonsense about things of which I know nothing whatsoever (19 b-c).

This caricature passing for a description is, as the character Socrates himself says (*Apology*, 23d), the stock charge against all philosophers. They do not have their feet on the ground because their heads are in the clouds, asking questions about those matters which everyone else takes for granted or about things that are beyond ordinary human experience and thereby not worth knowing. They challenge the common-sense opinions in morals and politics, as well as the common opinions in religion, but wish at the same time to stand above the beyond the practical consequences of doing so. By means of these questions and challenges, they attract those young people who are eager for novelty and innovation and at the same time contemptuous of tired old views and manners, teaching them rhetorical and dialectical tricks which turn them into glib, not to speak of snide, smart-alecks ready to jettison God, family, friends, and country. Philosophers are, at best, impractical muddle-headed fools or, at worst, careless corrupters of youth. The philosopher's own distinctions between sophists, wise men, and philosophers are too subtle or arch to have any practical value or count very much when bodies are being count-

ed for the showdown. Philosophers make no tangible contribution to human life. Professionals, such as physicians, lawyers, and teachers do. So do priests, politicians, and artisans, as do persons engaged in agriculture and business. Poets and other artists may go unappreciated but the marks they leave are among the most characteristic and most lasting of cultural endeavors. Even those other theoreticians or academics such as scientists, historians and mathematicians perform tasks which can be put to some good use in the human enterprise. But philosophers, committed as they are, to the most theoretical of activities and therefore the most practically useless, should best be ignored and forgotten. Two of them, Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida, have come in recent years to recognize and acknowledge this, despite their nostalgia for philosophy's past.

The tone of this expansion of the caricature may lead the reader to believe that the caricature should be dismissed. It *may* have been misapplied to Socrates, as Plato suggests, but sound political thinking requires that it not be dismissed altogether. It might not apply to the "genuine" philosopher who makes much of the difference between theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom and who, much more pertinently, *knows* not only the importance of ideas but the *danger* of them and cares about the danger. Now there is a kind of dealer in ideas, that obnoxious brand of human animal whom Eva Brann has shrewdly denominated a "monster,"<sup>4</sup> quite a while after Julien Benda's attack but a few years before Paul Johnson's more recent admonition,<sup>5</sup> namely, the intellectual. It is a feature of his monstrosity that he may frequently pass as a philosopher, but one who righteously wants to affect or change the world. It just might be that it is precisely this person whom Aristophanes portrays as the dangler from a basket. And who else could serve better the purposes of the play than that well known "pest," Socrates. The *Apology* is not nescient of the lack of ease in distinguishing the philosopher from the sophists (the ancient intellectuals). The character, Socrates, in his own defense, appeals to that which his judges, and most everyone else, can understand as a distinguishing mark: he charges no fee for his ideas. The fact that he has no "doctrine" is another distinguishing mark, but this is part of what is not so easy to understand.

In the *Phaedo*, however, Plato offers his reply to the caricature in that cryptic and seemingly negligible remark which is both the subject of this essay and the rubric for the theme of the dialogue—the relationship between philosophy, the soul, and mortality.

And as he spoke he lowered his feet to the ground and sat like this for the rest of the discussion (61d).

Not only does Socrates *not* have his feet dangling in mid-air, he has them planted squarely on the ground. The discussion in the *Phaedo* is, therefore, concerned with the relationship of philosophy to human mortality. It is about what one does in the face of death (not only one's own but those of loved ones, a more significant trial) and what is the best kind of life, granting the ineluctabil-

ity of death. This is no abstract and theoretical discussion for Socrates, inasmuch as he must suffer his own death shortly. As the *Phaedo* says:

At any rate, said Socrates, I hardly think that anyone who hears us now—even a comic poet—would say that I am wasting time and discoursing on subjects which do not concern me (69c).

This remark is corroborated by Plato when, speaking of arguments in general and of the arguments for immortality in particular, he has Socrates say:

We must not let it enter our minds that there may be no validity in argument. On the contrary, we should recognize that we ourselves are still intellectual invalids, but that we must brace ourselves and do our best to become healthy—you and the others partly with a view to the rest of your lives, but I directly in view of my death, because at the moment I am in danger of regarding it not philosophically but self-assertively. You know how, in an argument, people who have no real education care nothing for the facts of the case, and are only anxious to get their point of view accepted by the audience? Well, I feel that at this moment, that my anxiety will not be to convince my audience except incidentally, but to produce the strongest possible conviction in myself (90E-91B).

Socrates has his feet on the ground; he is discussing a question of the utmost relevance to himself and he is deadly serious about it. It is a discussion of mortality and immortality in the face of his own execution.

The reader is then struck with a marvelously contorted and disconcerting irony. That he has come to expect such a thing from the masters of irony (Socrates and more so Plato) is only meager insulation when a new one blows in—especially if it is a compound irony. The point here must be made explicitly and it must be made clearly and distinctly. Although it is a mark of great writing to be subtle and even arch in exposition, it is not a mark of great teaching. Thomas Aquinas says of Plato, for example, that “habuit malum modum docendi.”<sup>6</sup> For the sake of teaching, therefore, and at the risk of unsophistication, the irony can be untangled in the following manner.

Socrates has been accused of being an impractical theoretician with his feet off the ground, who also undermines with sophistry the common opinions on which civil society rests. But in the *Apology*, and in historical fact as well, according to Aristotle,<sup>7</sup> Socrates is particularly concerned with the human things, the domain of morals and politics—the earthly things—the things that

are his business. As the Athenian “gadfly,” he is seeing to it that those conditions which make philosophy and indeed *human* life possible are pursued and preserved,

. . . for I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your soul, proclaiming as I go ‘Wealth does not bring goodness, but goodness brings wealth and every other blessing both to the individual and to the State . . . .’

It is literally true (even if it sounds rather comical) that God has specially appointed me to this city, as though it were a large thoroughbred horse, which because of its great size, is inclined to be lazy and needs the stimulation of some stringing fly. It seems to me God has attached me to this city to perform the office of such a fly (*Apology*, 30b; 30e).

Pest though he may be, he is bothering about the human things and to that extent has his feet on the ground.

Now, in the *Phaedo*, to repeat the point made earlier, Plato responds to the stock caricature by asserting that Socrates, in his discourse about the soul and mortality in the face of his own death, has his feet on the ground, keeping them there for the entire length of the discussion. But the irony of the matter is that *that* very discussion about the soul and the things which it is like—the “forms” or “ideas”—is about things which are, of course, not on the earth nor of the earth but “above” it. The discussion turns out to be not about the “human things” but about the “divine” things—not about the physical, moral or political realms but about the metaphysical realm.

If all these absolute realities, such as beauty and goodness, which we are always talking about, really exist; if it is to them as we rediscover our own former knowledge of them, that we refer, as copies to their patterns, all the objects of our physical perception—if these realities exist, does it not follow that our souls must exist too even before our birth whereas if they do not exist, our discussion would seem a waste of time (76e).

Then let us return to the same examples which we were discussing before. Does that absolute

reality which we define in our discussion remain always constant and invariable, or not? Does absolute equality or beauty or any other independent entity which really exists ever admit change of any kind? Or does each one of these uniform and independent entities remain always constant and invariable, never admitting any alteration in any respect or in any sense? (77d).

But when it [the soul] investigates by itself, it passes into the realm of the pure and immortal and changeless, and being of a kindred nature, when it is once independent and free from interference, consorts with it always and strays no longer, but remains, in that realm of the absolute, constant and invariable, through contact with beings of a similar nature. And this condition of the soul we call wisdom (79d).

Now, Cebes, he said, see whether this is our conclusion from all that we have said. The soul is most like that which is divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, and ever self-consistent and invariable, whereas body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, dissoluble, and never self-consistent (80b).

It would seem that the discussion places Socrates' feet not only in the clouds, but "above" and "beyond" the clouds. Is it perhaps that Plato is *simply* confirming Aristophanes' caricature and thereby confirming the case not only against Socrates but also against philosophy itself—indeed against "foundational" or "onto-theological" philosophy as the current fashion will have it? And if this be so, then perhaps too we can understand another odd comment from the very writer and chief speaker of the *Phaedo*: "Plato was ill" (59b) and not present for the discussion, suggesting his separation not only from "dubious" arguments for immortality but also from high-flying philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps, but not so "simply."

On the one hand a discussion of mortality, immortality, and the nature of the soul, would be perfectly appropriate for someone who is about to die. Such concerns in these circumstances are not the exclusive domain of philosophers. The might even be regarded as a mark of "realism" and "practicality"—of having one's feet on the ground. Yet the discussion is unmistakably about metaphysical things, i.e., the "divine" and not the "human." Hence the platonic irony. But there is another twist to it—the *final* twist. Just as with other things human, the irony cannot be endless, or else it could not be, or be understood.

If it be so that there exists a polarity and a tension between politics and phi-

losophy, as the *Apology*<sup>9</sup> and other dialogues of Plato affirm, and if it be so that the proper business of philosophers is the inquiry into and investigation of everything and anything unto their ultimate grounds, even if the inquiry and investigation should conclude that no such grounds exist or that the very inquiry itself is futile or misplaced, then it follows that when the philosopher is concerned with metaphysics, he does have *his* feet on the ground; he is minding *his* own business. We must say here, again with our attention on the concerns and arguments of current anti-foundationalists, e.g., the later Heidegger, Derrida, Rorty and their followers, that the constitutive element of metaphysics is the *inquiry* itself. This is true of every period of history of philosophy, whether it be the ancient, medieval, modern or contemporary period. It also matters not whether the priority is ontological or epistemological. For to begin with one is to reach the other. The even halfway serious posing of the question that asks whether or not there is a primary or fundamental sense of “reality” is deep into foundations. The particular *answer* that is proposed by any given investigation is of secondary importance in determining whether or not a foundational endeavor takes place. The fact alone, of the inquiry seriously begun, is sufficient. The inquirer is most faithfully the philosopher when he takes any question to its end to find out whether or not the answer satisfies the question.

Although the philosopher must consider the nature of political, poetic or technical things, he must leave politics to the politicians, poetry to the poets, and technical things to the technicians. This not to say, however, that because of his deflection from the careers of politician, poet or technician, he could not or ought not “advise,” “guide” or “teach” them. It is precisely because it is in his business to investigate these things, and to distinguish or differentiate between them in the course of thinking about their natures that he can advise, guide, or teach.

Herein lies the *telos*, the end, of philosophy, a primal theme which Plato illustrates in such dialogues as the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist* on the one hand and the *Apology* and *Phaedo* on the other. A point throughout is the “wisdom” of Socrates, the only wisdom to which he admits—most explicitly in the *Apology* (21d; 23a-b) but operatively elsewhere. That wisdom, as Socrates describes it paradoxically, is a knowledge of his own ignorance. This means an understanding of the limits of his own knowledge (and by extension, of human knowledge as such), an understanding achieved through sustained inquiry into the differences among opinions about things (and by extension, among things); thus the Socratic dialogue.

The tensions between politics and philosophy lurk in every corner of the *Apology* along with the crisscrossing contrasts among politics, poetry, “*techne*” (the artisans) and philosophy—their activities, ends, and presumptions. The politicians’ claim to know what they do not know (*Apology*, 22a); the poets speak true things but by virtue of a divine inspiration and not from knowledge (*Apology*, 22b-c); and the artisans, who do know (as the “know how” of a craft) presume to speak on everything (*Apology*, 22d). But the philosopher, in know-

ing the limits of politics, poetry, and “technology,” as well as of philosophy, has, as it were, clipped his own wings, not leaving the ground of what he knows.

Plato speaks equally dramatically of the dangers of politics to philosophy in relating the risks to Socrates both from the democracy (*Apology*, 32a-c) and from the oligarchy (*Apology*, 32c-e). The danger from the oligarchy is particularly poignant inasmuch as its leaders had been “students” of Socrates.

The corruption of a philosopher’s teaching in the hands of political activists, even among the most “faithful” of them is not an uncommon complaint in the history of the tension between the actors and the ideologues. Most recently, what might be called “Marxian orthodoxy” has disengaged itself from the failed practices of the activist disciples (Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, or Mao) by means of the distinction between pure and not yet applied Marxism on one hand and applied (e.g., in the Soviet Union) but hardly pure pseudo-Marxism on the other.

The complaint is self-serving and even puzzling in the face of Marx’s own insistence in the *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) that “the goal now is not to interpret but to change the world.” The purists’ interpretation of the changes which were imposed on the world (i.e., the several totalitarian and repressive socialist and communist regimes) is that, because they *were* so universally infelicitous, they could not have been “authentic.” Non-Marxist, even anti-Marxist adulterations must have been allowed to creep in.

Change has been integral to the agenda of much of the “modern project,” from Descartes through the Enlightenment to Marx and Nietzsche—change in thought directed toward change in nature. The aim has been to change (or at least to dominate) nature, in the physical as well as in the moral realms; and the effort has not been unsuccessful—but at the cost of “authenticity.”

Or, to put it another way, how much and what kinds of change are compatible with “authenticity”? Is the goal perhaps the actualization in this world of a New Jerusalem, completely secular, of course, and a monument to Marxist (or some other solely human) purity? A lesson in “feet upon the ground” might well be in order at this point.

Plato himself knew the temptation—and the price—of trying to make of philosophy more than a limit to thought, the enticements of a chance at last to really guide a ruler. His “Sicilian fling” or misadventure, his attempt to teach the tyrant Dionysius some philosophy in order that he might govern well, was a bitter lesson for Plato (*Seventh Letter*, 345c-352a). It is not the role of philosophy to instruct princes or to plan cities.

For philosophy to be of any use to would-be politicians, poets, or “technicians,” it is necessary for them first to desire to understand the limits of knowledge, the finitude of human understanding. Philosophy begins with the desire (a kind of *eros*) to know, but it ends as a love (thus the *philo*) of understanding,



that is, as the ability to differentiate the natures and limits of things and opinions about them.

When the desire to know is clipped short, when the range of possible differentiations is pre-emptively hemmed in, to make it more accessible, then we get the stingy “understanding” found among contemporary literary theorists. Making use of the fashionable “method” of differentiating, that is, “deconstruction”—they arrive at no more profound “hegemonic structures” than race, sex or gender, and class for their universal categories or ultimate explanations. Unlike the poets in the *Apology*, these literati are hardly divinely inspired.

The “artisans” of our time are just as puffed up and unaware of the moderating role of philosophy as were their counterparts in the *Apology*. Technology is a kind of knowledge and it is becoming ever more powerful; but it is not omniscience. The minds of technologists are filled with theories. Philosophy, as the criticism of theories, is the killer of their joy in ideas. On the one hand we have those pelagian optimists (for example, concerning environmental problems) who believe that more technology is the solution to problems brought about by technology—indeed scoffing at the very suggestion of human imperfectability. And, on the other hand (again in the context of environmental problems) we have the gnostic morticians who would “cut and run” before the battle is half-begun, in the pseudo-humble belief that “Nature” would be better off without the human species. In the first case we have the careless arrogance of conquerors of nature; in the second we have the presumptuous quietism of abject submission to it. The moderate voice of reason, with which philosophy speaks, is neither the voice of God nor the voice of doom.

The philosopher does have his feet on the ground, when among his many and sundry conversations, he discusses the “divine” things; for in so doing he profoundly understands his humanity. His search for God or the gods is an indication that he is not God or one of the gods. In understanding his humanity, he recognizes and acknowledges his mortality. The inquiry into the immortality of the “Soul,” which like the “Forms” is universal and public, uncovers the radical “mortality of the individual self.”<sup>11</sup>

In the act of distinguishing the human things from the divine—the activity of making distinctions and therefore recognizing differences being its peculiar and specific work—philosophy resists the most tempting and dangerous of foundationalisms. I speak of that naked tempter—the individual ego as the sole and ultimate arbiter of what is true and what is right and even what is pleasing.

With his feet on the ground and his mind on the “divine” or metaphysical things (dare we say on the “grounds” of things), Socrates is portrayed by Plato as the embodiment and coincidence of philosophy, humanity, and mortality.<sup>12</sup> In other words, it is in the act of philosophizing<sup>13</sup> that both the humanity and the finitude of human beings is discussed in the most *radical* way.<sup>14</sup>

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## NOTES

1. A fairly recent book on the *Phaedo*—Paul Stern's *Socratic Rationalism and Political Philosophy: An Interpretation of Plato's Phaedo* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993)—covers some of the same ground and even shares one of the conclusions reached here. Stern, however, has a different understanding of Plato's notion of the foundation for philosophy. Moreover, the line and its interpretation which are the point of departure for this discussion are not treated in the book nor is Plato's pun seen as a more profound response to Aristophanes than the one given in the *Apology*. Thus Stern misses the double irony as the vehicle whereby Plato indicates his deepest understanding of both political activity and political philosophy. Nevertheless on page 145 of his book, Stern reaches the correct conclusion: "The character of human existence itself moves us to seek explanations in that which transcends humanity. As the *Phaedo* makes clear in its focus on death and immortality, human existence is characterized by an awareness of incompleteness, an awareness that confronts us most powerfully when we face our mortality." While Stern attributes this awareness to a non-dogmatic, thereby rational choice, the present discussion attributes it to the very act of philosophizing itself leaving intact the erotic, and thereby transcendent, character of the act—an act committed not by Plato but by Nietzsche as well, his protestations and those of his epigoni notwithstanding. In attributing this awareness to "Socratic rationalism" (an infelicitous anachronism), Stern seems to regard rationalism as an accomplishment in itself. The major difference between Stern's argument and the one offered here is that he locates the "ground" of Socratic philosophy in self-understanding (p. 180). This seems inconsistent with what he claims in the above-quoted passage from p. 145. A point of departure is not a ground. Consistent with what Stern writes on p. 145, Plato discovers the ground in the *order* of the world (that order he calls divine) which is distinct from the self, but of which the self is part. The result is a firmer and more stable awareness and appreciation of politics and humanity.
2. For some sense of Plato's use of irony, see *Phaedrus* (276d), *Republic* (536c), *Statesman* (268d), *Timaeus* (59c), *Laws* (685a). Then confer with Aristotle's *Politics*, II, 6 (1265a6) and Kierkegaard's *Concept of Irony*.
3. All of the quotations from Plato's dialogues in this essay are taken from Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Pantheon, 1961).
4. Eva Brann, "Commencement Address," St. John's College Magazine (Annapolis: July, 1974). Cf. Aristotle's *Politics*, Bk. II, ch. 8, near the end of the chapter.
5. Julien Benda, *La trahison des clercs*, 1927; Paul Johnson, *The Intellectuals* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).
6. Thomas Aquinas, *In Aristotelis Librum De Anima Commentarium* (Turin: Marietti, 1948), I, VIII, 107, p. 31. [Plato] "had a bad method of teaching."
7. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk. I, ch. 6, 1987b1.
8. Ann Hartle, *Death and the Disinterested Spectator* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 81-83.
9. Plato, *Apology*. (32a). "The true champion of justice, if he intends to survive even for a short time must necessarily confine himself to private life and leave politics alone."
10. Plato, *Ibid.*, (29c-31b).
11. An afterlife for the *individual self* is represented in the *Phaedo* in the form of a myth (107d-114d).
12. The last lines of the *Phaedo* read as follows: "Such, Echecrates, was the end of our comrade, who was, we may fairly say, of all those whom we knew in our time, the bravest and also the wisest and most upright man" (115e). The theme of the *Phaedo* corroborates that very famous line in the *Apology* which has been incompletely and therefore incorrectly translated as "The unexamined life is not worth living. The Loeb Library edition of the Greek text says, ὁ δὲ ἐνεῖ τ'αὐτὸν βίῳ ὃ ἐβίβητο ἐνὶ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ (The unexamined life is not worth living for a man). (38a5-6). Plato connects inquiry necessarily with being human. For God (or the gods) and beasts philosophy is unnecessary, indeed, it is absolutely useless. It is, however, useful and necessary in order to be human. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. X, ch. 7-8, 1177a10-1179a30. Non pace to Pragmatists, Marxists, Darwinians, Freudians and the like who either deny theoretical inquiry or reduce it to the practical or the emotive.
13. In chapter 14 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche suggests another interpretation of the *Phaedo*, another interpretation of Socrates' life and death and consequently another conception of human nature. Man for Nietzsche is *homo faber*, man the maker—the maker of illusions, the constructor of paradigms, the creator of fictions. Those illusions or fictions are, of course, science, religion, history, mathematics, and indeed philosophy—fictions whereby human beings keep the absurdity and horror of nature at bay. Nietzsche suggests that in the face of death, Socrates, that "despotic logician," senses the limits of reason when voices in his dreams urge him to practice and cultivate the arts. The *Phaedo* reports that Socrates believes that he was already practicing the greatest art, i.e., philosophy, but that in order to clear his conscience and to

obey the dream, he set himself the task of writing poetry by versifying some of Aesop's fables. Socrates points out that a poet who is worthy of the name ought to work on imaginative themes, not descriptive ones. He goes on to say that since *he* was not good at inventing stories, he made use of the already existing fables and versified them (60-61c). Nietzsche argues that this passage shows that both Plato and his character, Socrates, recognize that it is poetry, the creating of fiction, and not philosophy that defines human nature. Better yet, philosophy is just a sub-category of poetry with which one faces death by making existence appear intelligible and thereby justified. If, however, Nietzsche's argument is sound, then we cannot take it seriously. We must regard it as just another fiction. On the other hand, if we take his argument seriously, then we must regard his thesis, i.e., that humanity is defined by fictions, by illusions, by poetry, as unsound. [The prohibition against testing a thinker's thesis on his own thought, i.e., the prohibition against self-reference, does not *derive* (*pace* Bertrand Russell) from the intrinsic course of an argument, but from an extrinsic wish to control or protect it by an *ad hoc* regulation.] For Nietzsche's own argument is not a poem; it is a philosophic statement, false though it may be.

Again, to say that poetry defines human nature is philosophizing, not poetizing. Furthermore, poetry as Nietzsche himself claims, aims at domination of nature through the creation of fictions. The poet is a "fabricator" like the gods. Philosophy, however, seeks to *understand* nature (and everything else—including poetry) in order to say something true about them. This is not to deny that philosophy has its own rhetoric. Philosophizing, i.e., inquiring about things in order to understand them, is at the same time a recognition of the finitude, the mortality, and the humanity of the philosopher.

Finally, what Socrates does in the face of death, as the *Phaedo* bears out, is not poetry but philosophy. The myths that supplement the arguments for immortality are not higher truths but ways of showing the limits of reason and, therefore, the limits of human nature.

14. Heidegger argues this same point in his discussion with Cassirer at Davos in 1929. Cf. "A Discussion between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger," tr. Francis Slade, in *The Existentialist Tradition*, Ed. Nino Langiulli (New York: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 192-203, reprinted as *European Existentialism* with a new introduction, (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1997.)