

Wilson, Emily. *The Death of Socrates*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Socrates would be an important figure in the history of philosophy even if all we knew about him was what Aristotle tells us: “[H]e occupied himself with ethics even though he said nothing about the universe, but in the course of his activities he searched for the general (*to katholou*) and was the first to understand about the concept of boundaries (*horismōn*)” (*Metaphysics* 987b.1-4). Poets and thinkers before him had thought about ethics. But what made Socrates different is that he was able to devise a process for discovering it that caused him to move away from particulars to general definitions. Without that significant step forward in thought, Plato could never have devised his theory of forms, and Aristotle could not have written his treatises on ethics.

But it is not because of his thinking that Socrates has been remembered, as Emily Wilson demonstrates in her lively and entertaining book. Rather, Socrates has remained an inspiration to politicians, thinkers, and artists for more than two millennia because of his death. If he had not died as he did, we would be talking about pre-Platonic rather than pre-Socratic philosophers. But as Plato describes him in the *Apology* and the *Crito*, Socrates did nothing to stop himself from being executed. He did not try to flatter and appease the jury. When given an opportunity to propose an alternative punishment, he offered only the trivial sum of one mina. His friend Crito devised a plan that would have allowed him to escape from prison and live the rest of his life in exile, but Socrates again refused to cooperate. In Plato’s *Apology* (28c), Socrates says that he chose to emulate Achilles. Achilles was told by his goddess mother Thetis that he would soon die if he chose to remain in Troy and avenge the death of his friend Patroclus, but would live a long life, though without renown, if he went back home to Thessaly. Plato has Socrates explain that Achilles chose death because that was the more ethical course.

Socrates would have known that a heroic death would bring him immortality: no Greek could forget the names or deeds of Patroclus, Hector, and Achilles. Biographers of poets and philosophers also drew on the narrative patterns of traditional myth, and found passages in their works that could be used to suggest that they died in extraordinary ways. The tragic poet Aeschylus supposedly was killed when an eagle dropped a tortoise onto his bald head. The philosopher-poet Empedocles was thought to have jumped into the crater of Mount Etna. Writers who were considered impious died particularly demeaning deaths. The philosopher Heraclitus was said to have

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succumbed to louse disease. A particularly dramatic story was told about the tragic poet Euripides, who had been accused by the comic poets of inventing new gods: he was supposedly torn apart by hunting dogs, much as in his drama the *Bacchae* the notoriously impious Pentheus was destroyed by women who had been driven insane by the god Dionysus. Someone would almost certainly have ascribed a similarly bizarre and violent death to Socrates, who (according to his accusers) “did not believe in the gods in whom the city believed, but other new-fangled divinities” (*Apol.* 24c). It was only by allowing himself to be executed that Socrates was able to remain in control of his own biography.

Such conscious control over the desires that most people find unmanageable is the key to Socrates’ character. He could drink his friends under the table, but without getting drunk himself. He was indifferent to physical comfort. He seemed to have little need for the support of his family, and at least as Plato depicts him in the *Symposium* was able to restrain his physical passion, even when sleeping in the arms of the attractive and brilliant Alcibiades. He was also able to overcome the fear of death, and drinks the poison calmly while his friends burst into tears. As Wilson observes in her introduction (p. 11):

For most of us, death is something that comes upon us. We cannot predict the day or the hour when we will die. Socrates, by contrast, died in complete control, and his death fitted perfectly with his life. If Socrates had been crucified, then the whole history of western philosophy and religion might have been different.

By choosing hemlock (rather than execution by suffocation) Socrates was able to die painlessly. Enid Bloch has established that the variety of hemlock used was so-called poison hemlock, not water hemlock, which causes convulsions and cramps, like most other poisons.¹ Poison hemlock affects the peripheral nervous system, so that the victim gradually loses sensation in his limbs, but retains mental lucidity until the poison causes his lungs and heart to fail. If water hemlock had been used, Plato’s description of Socrates’ death would need to be considered as another example of Platonic fiction, like the myth of Er in the *Republic* or the story of Atlantis in the *Timaeus*, as Christopher Gill

¹ Enid Bloch, “Hemlock Poisoning and the Death of Socrates,” in *The Trial and Execution of Socrates: Sources and Controversies*, ed. Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 255-78.

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has argued.² Instead, in this case at least Plato has provided a narrative that seems accurate in every detail.

In the first chapter of the book Wilson discusses Socrates' role as the founder of philosophy, in the fullest sense of the term, which considers ethics, language, the workings of the mind, and the meaning of life. She considers his use of irony (*eironeia*), though without reaching any definite conclusion about its function: Does he pretend he knows nothing because he wants his students to think for themselves? Does he really believe he knows nothing, when clearly he does know more about ethical values than his interlocutors, or does he mean that his knowledge is (as he says) worth little or nothing in comparison with that of the god? She takes on the difficult issue of how Socrates can claim that no harm can happen to a good man (e.g., *Apol.* 30d), suggesting that he must mean that it does not matter what happens to the body, as long as no damage is done to the soul. She suggests that we should understand Socrates' extraordinary claim that no one willingly would do wrong (e.g., *Apol.* 37a) as a question about knowledge. But since Socrates admits that even his human knowledge is fallible, how can he know he is right? Wilson might have observed that he had help: In the *Apology* he claims that he has been guided by a divine sign (*daimonion*) (31d).

This book is not intended for specialists, but I believe even general readers would have benefited from some discussion of Socrates' distinctive methodology of asking questions, eliciting answers, and then asking more questions. The primary purpose of these questions is to show that his interlocutor does not understand what he is saying, or has only a partial grasp of the general concept that he believes he fully understands. Nowhere does Socrates employ this method to more devastating effect than in his questioning of his accuser Meletus in the *Apology*. As Plato has Alcibiades say in the *Symposium*, he talks about pack-asses, bronze-smiths, shoemakers, and tanners (221e). In his examination of Meletus he uses the analogy of mules to show that Meletus' charges against him are logically inconsistent. The dialogue provides an illustration to the jury of Socrates' *modus operandi*: using comparisons so deceptively simple that his interlocutor fails to see where the discussion is leading him. People are so stunned by Socrates' performance (in the *Meno* 80a he is compared to a sting-ray) that they never seem able to point out that the analogies Socrates employs may not always be applicable or appropriate.

Wilson's second chapter provides an informative overview of the political world in which Socrates carried on his conversations. Socrates was accused of impiety and of corrupting young men. Virtually every known

² Christopher Gill, "The Death of Socrates," in *The Trial and Execution of Socrates*, pp. 251-55.

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charge of impiety was made at least in part for political reasons. He also had been closely associated with some highly controversial figures, among them Critias, who had been executed for crimes committed when he was one of the thirty tyrants, and Alcibiades, who was thought to have been involved in a set of sacrilegious acts just before the Athenians sent their ill-fated expedition off to Sicily. In retrospect these acts were widely believed to have contributed to its failure. Wilson suggests that if Socrates had not been associated with Alcibiades, he might not have been executed. Another problem was that he seemed like a sophist, one of the many foreign rhetoricians who taught young men the art of persuasion, often, or so it was alleged, without much attention to ethics or traditional values. But one should never underestimate the number of enemies that (as Plato has him say) he managed to make out of all sorts of people who might ordinarily never have thought about him, just by questioning them in his characteristic way, and showing them (along with anyone else who was watching) that they did not know what they were talking about (*Apol.* 23a).

Socrates was determined to do what he thought right, even if that meant disagreeing with the majority of people, or indeed obeying orders given to him by the regime of the Thirty Tyrants. But he was not a conscientious objector in the modern fashion; he was willing to fight in defense of his city and served as a hoplite in the first phase of the Peloponnesian War. In 415 B.C.E. he was clearly too old to be sent off to Sicily, but presumably he would have gone if he had been eligible, for the same reason that he remained in prison in Athens to await execution even though his friend Crito had arranged for him to escape and live in exile in Thessaly. Wilson believes that it is impossible to reconcile the difference between Socrates' civil disobedience in the *Apology* with his avowed conformity to the city's personified laws in the *Crito*. But here it is important to remember that Socrates describes the imaginary epiphany of the Laws not for his own edification but for that of his friend Crito, to whom Socrates tells a story, because Crito could not follow the argument Socrates made earlier in the dialogue that committing counter-injustice (i.e., by going into exile) is nonetheless injustice (49c-d). We do not need to suppose that Socrates himself literally believed in the story that he devised for the benefit of his friend.

In her third chapter Wilson offers a brief account of the Socratic question: How much of Socrates is in fact Plato? Xenophon in his various accounts portrays Socrates as a wise advisor on many different topics, without the intellectual bite and dialectical trickery that he displays in the dialogues of Plato, where he questions his interlocutors' assumptions and makes his audience think. To what extent is the Socrates of Plato's dialogues a projection of Plato himself? Wilson makes a point of emphasizing that this Socrates insists on an environment from which women are almost completely excluded. She finds it distressing that he is willing to spend only a short time

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with his wife Xanthippe and his children, preferring to die in the company of his male friends. But there is a religious reason why Socrates is determined not to be surrounded by uncontrollable weeping: “I have heard that one should die in an atmosphere of ritual silence” (*euphēmia*) (*Phaedo* 117e). Such concern with traditional religious values is notable in one who is being executed on a charge of impiety. Even more striking are Socrates’ last words: “Crito, we owe [the sacrifice of] a cock to Asclepius. Pay the debt and don’t forget” (118). Asclepius is the god of healing, but what has Socrates been cured of, and why does he speak these last words just when the numbness reaches the area around his lower abdomen (*ētron*)? One possible answer is that he offers thanks to the god because he has been cured of the disease of life, or more specifically (given the location affected by the poison) of the disease of sexual desire.

The *Phaedo* is remembered not for its long discussion of the immortality of the soul, but for its description of Socrates’ last moments. For all Plato’s efforts to represent the workings of Socrates’ mind, in later times (as Wilson shows) people have consistently preferred to concentrate on his death. Even though technically he did not commit suicide, but rather refused to accept any alternative to execution, Socrates provided a model for self-induced martyrdoms, especially for Stoic philosophers. The younger Cato asked for a sword and a copy of the *Phaedo* when he executed himself. When he was ordered to commit suicide by Nero, the philosopher Seneca attempted to die calmly, like Socrates. He slit his veins; when that didn’t work he took hemlock; then when he still couldn’t die took a hot bath and suffocated in the steam.

Christians compared Socrates with Jesus. Despite the obvious differences in the modes of their execution, there was enough similarity in their resolution and willingness to die to make the association, which may have helped some pagans better to understand the full significance of the Crucifixion. But Christian theologians observed that Socrates suffered far less than most of the Christian martyrs and had little sympathy for Socrates’ final expressions of piety, which (as we have seen) can be still too easily disregarded by modern readers who cannot imagine how religion pervaded the lives of all ancient people, including Socrates and Plato, who did not want to eliminate religion but rather to reform it.

Wilson makes some acute observations about representations of Socrates in art. David’s famous 1787 portrait shows him being vigorously independent in his last hours, an individual challenging the mistaken will of the masses. Guérin’s 1797 painting of the suicide of the younger Cato also emphasizes resistance and individual protest. The viewer’s eyes are drawn to Cato tearing out his intestines with his sword; his scroll of the *Phaedo* lies on the ground. Socrates had become a model for nonviolent civil protest.

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The death of Socrates continues to acquire new meaning. Recent interpretations give Xanthippe a more positive role, as observer or commentator rather than as shrew. Wilson herself comes up with an ingenious example of a new interpretation that allows Socrates himself to act like a woman. When he utters his last words, Wilson suggests that Socrates is grateful to the god because he is now giving birth to a new life (albeit for himself). To me that idea, although ingenious, seems more appropriate for a work of fiction than an academic book. There is no justification for such a reading in the relentlessly masculine atmosphere of the *Phaedo*. As Sheila Murnaghan has shown,³ women have no place in Plato's world unless they can act like men, as in the ideal state described in the *Republic*.

Today's undergraduates sometimes resent Socrates because he is so unwilling to compromise and determined to make his interlocutors feel uncomfortable. This highly readable and accessible book will help them understand why past ages have admired him, and that they too have something to learn from his courage and resolution in the face of death. I only wish that it could have told them more about his investigative methodology.

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³ Sheila Murnaghan, "How a Woman Can Be More Like a Man: The Dialogue between Ischomachus and His Wife in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*," *Helios* 15 (1988), pp. 9-22.