The Gadfly's Sting and the Hemlock Crucible

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To what extent can a «democratic» society survive «authoritarian» opposition without becoming an «authoritarian» society itself? A question like this is not new, but perhaps more pressing today than it ever was – one may be reminded of Socrates of Athens. Socrates' ideas were explicitly called to the fore by the winner of the 2022 Balzan Prize for Moral Philosophy, Martha Nussbaum, in her acceptance speech delivered on the occasion of the awards ceremony at the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome. In acknowledging «the rich faculty culture» of the Law School at the University of Chicago where she teaches, she recalled that her colleagues were willing to dedicate their time to others, revealing that «so many of my manuscripts have been poked and prodded by critical questions asked in the best Socratic spirit, always civil and respectful but often skeptical and deeply challenging».

Quite surprisingly, however, as far as we know today, this skepticism had a price. Socrates was sentenced to death by the citizens of Athens who may have considered him as an authoritarian threat to their «democracy». In his disciple Plato's philosophy (Plato is usually accredited with the story of how his mentor died, as well what his ideals were), we find plenty of reasons to wonder about democratic and authoritarian systems of government – or self-government.

The Balzan Foundation will award one of the 2025 Balzan Prizes in the subject area Athenian Democracy Revisited. Given concerns about the fate of democracies in our globalized world today, perhaps it would be interesting if this puzzling conundrum could be addressed at the 2025 Balzan Prizewinners Forum in Bern. A related theme could be scholarship in the Classics, a crucial and perhaps even paradigmatic field of inquiry that has been under scrutiny since the beginning of the

twentieth century not so much for cultivating as for opposing modern «democratic» values. Decades ago, in Cold War times, Plato was accused by some Western or «Free World» scholars of having inspired totalitarian regimes – Communist ones included. Nowadays, especially in the United States, Classics departments – stigmatized as relics or remnants of white supremacy and Eurocentrism – are being reshaped or even closed.

In this light, I share some thoughts on Socrates, perhaps the most famous figure in the Classics. New developments in the natural sciences, for example, the chemical structure of hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), raise questions about Plato's account of the way Socrates quite slowly and calmly died – as if there weren't enough questions already about the way he lived his life before drinking the extremely toxic substance. On this front, some even wonder if Socrates not only may have chosen to be condemned to death rather than leave Athens (legally or illegally in order to avoid the sentence as his closest friends suggested), but also to drink the hemlock under force as opposed to seeking an alternative way of putting an end to his own life (or having someone else take it). Choosing the way he was going to die – if he did have this choice – may be interpreted as symbolic of the meaning he gave to his legacy, i.e., the hemlock as a symbol of the deadly power of hypocrisy. However, by reading Plato's account, it is not at all clear that he did have this choice.

Theramenes' execution of just a few years before may have inaugurated hemlock-induced capital punishment in Athens. One may suppose, then, either that Socrates identified with Theramenes and thereby chose to die in the same way, or instead that Socrates' judges associated him with Theramenes and forced him to go through the same extremely unsettling, painful kind of death. Theramenes was a prominent member of the oligarchy which had toppled the Athenian democracy, but he was put to death by Critias, leader of the oligarchs (and Plato's uncle), without due process, precisely in order to punish him for his defense of the rule of law against any existing city government, be it democratic or oligarchic. Socrates may then have chosen to identify with Theramenes and to die as a martyr of the rule of law. On the other hand, the judges (the democratic Assembly that had regained control of the city) may have decided to treat him just like Critias treated Theramenes when the oligarchs held power. They may have taken such action in

order to make it clear to their opponents – at that point in time no longer ruling the city – that the democratic faction was just as ready as their opponents had been to annihilate dissent no matter where it was coming from – within their own ranks, or elsewhere, even if that meant a prominent Athenian who had never taken a clear stand on the issue of «democracy».

However, as to whether Socrates was the one who chose in which way he was to die, the embarrassing question concerns the reason the Athenian «democracy» sentenced him to death. Aiming at «exhibiting philosophy as an integral part of social and political life», Bertrand Russell starts his analysis by pointing out that «Socrates is a very difficult subject for the historian» since it was not clear «whether we know very little or a great deal» about this man.[1] More than half a century of recent historical studies may (or may not) have produced an answer to this question to some extent at least. On one hand, as Russell explained, Socrates «taught philosophy to the young, but not for money» even though he was «undoubtedly an Athenian citizen of modest means» – and we may wonder if those youngsters were really of modest means. On the other hand, says Russell, his pupils Xenophon and Plato wrote very different things about him: the former leaving his death «unexplained», while the latter's «excellence as a writer of fiction throws doubts on him as a historian». At the end of the day, it seems clear to Russell that the «real ground of hostility», which resulted in the verdict of guilty and the death sentence, could not be stated openly because of the amnesty which followed the restoration of democracy in Athens. But as everyone understood, Socrates «was supposed to be connected with the aristocratic party», even though, Russell points out, «Critias, who knew his ways having studied under him, forbade him to continue teaching to the young» under the oligarchic government.

Putting aside the supposedly «insoluble» question – as Russell put it – of the relationship between the Platonic Socrates to the real man, and notwithstanding the overall goal of his analytic efforts to ground the history of philosophy in the history of Athenian society and politics,

[1] Bertrand Russel, *The History of Western Philosophy (1945)*, Chapter XI "Socrates", p. 82-93, (https://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF%20Books/History%20of%20Western%20Philosophy.pdf).

Russell argues that if Socrates really «practised dialectic in the way Plato describes it, then the hostility to him is easily explained». In other words, Socrates probably did not actually practice the «Socratic spirit» at all, because if he did, «all the humbugs in Athens would combine against him». In her Balzan Prize Acceptance Speech mentioned above, Martha Nussbaum implied that the «Socratic spirit» is quite hard to find and most likely ends up being unappreciated, even in some of today's higher education settings where it is assumed to be a crucial device for any kind of inquiry, and in cultures where it is considered foundational to democracy and widely practiced regularly under the name of «Socratic seminars» already in high schools, if not earlier.

Russell's conclusions leave the door open to new inquiries, both historical and theoretical, according to the principles of scientific work. He was concerned about how philosophy may or may not fit in with a democratic society, identifying as «inconsistent» the claim that «democracy is good, but persons holding certain opinions should not be allowed to vote». But, on the other hand, he argued that «logical errors are of greater practical importance than many people believe», since they «enable their perpetrators to hold the comfortable position on every subject in turn».

Such a conclusion underscores the value of the International Balzan Foundation's work, which is embodied in all Balzan public events. In 2008, for example, a Balzan Symposium dedicated to *Truth in Science, the Humanities and Religion* was set up to address the debate between «those maintaining that there are absolute truths and those believing facts to be social constructs»[2]. On this occasion, the meaning of the word «truth» for historians and social scientists came under the scrutiny of Quentin Skinner, who was awarded the 2006 Balzan Prize for Political Thought and Dominique Schnapper, recipient of the 2002 Balzan Prize for Sociology. Skinner argued in favor of revising the concept of «truth» when dealing with the results of historians' and sociologists' work. Schnapper, however, disagreed on this point. The two-day event involved an active, appreciative audience which filled the Auditorium of the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI) in

[2] M.E.H. Nicolette Mout and Werner Stauffacher (eds.), *Truth in Science, the Humanities and Religion: Balzan Symposium 2008*, Dordrecht et al.: Springer, 2010, pp. vi. For the section on history and the social sciences, see pp. 89-115.

Lugano. Perhaps it would be useful to go back to this issue almost twenty years later, as envisaged at the time by Werner Stauffacher and the Balzan Prize Committee he represented on that occasion. I think Socrates – whoever he was – would appreciate such an effort even in light of the difficulty of coming to an agreement about how to use such a fateful – and for him lethal – word.