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Seeking a Taste for Life in the Face of Our Fragility

To make room on earth for the life
of philosophy, it is precisely philosophers like
Socrates who are required.*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Despite the wealth of stories of incredible, indeed, truly amazing instances of human endurance and survival, it is still the case that we are fragile beings. Undeniably, we are vulnerable and we are so from the start; finitude means something like this to be sure. Significantly, our being impressed by such stories is evidence of how near fragility and vulnerability are to our everyday understanding. To speak briefly, let's just say that in all kinds of physical and psychological ways we are at risk – at risk always. As we are reminded in *Being and Time*: any living being is already old enough to die. And yet for all our readiness to agree with such claims, Heidegger's description of the Theyself (*Das Man*) in *Being and Time* reminds us the lengths we go to forget, as it were, what we already understand.

* Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, transl. John Wild, James Edie, John O'Neill (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern, 1963), 37.

I understand Heidegger to say it is an always already tacit, if vague and oddly distant, understanding of our fragility that makes us want to forget it as central to who and how we are; and to forget we are this way inescapably. Were we to begin with this acknowledgement, then we would be able to learn there is great virtue in our vulnerability and a fecundity in our fragility if we are capable of providing sophisticated interpretations of them.[1]

As a brief opening into and contribution to such reflections, I offer a reading of Plato's *Apology* at once both straightforward and a bit fanciful, while making no claims to scholarship as narrowly understood yet embracing the power of imaginative interpretations while respecting the text no less for this readily admitted lack. Were I to have been more scholarly, I would have tracked and mapped the many and nuanced uses of the word "if" in the apologia of Socrates, a word he uses scores and scores of times to do more than simply set up an antecedent to a consequent. Using what the classist John Kirby calls in his landmark essay the "great triangle" of Greek literature, I would have focused on the triangle's three points of persuasion, force, and love (*peithio*, *bia*, *eros*); I would have followed the word "if" around the text to show how it invokes time and the imagination, the future, and sets itself the task of implicating his audience in a dialogue he is not allowed to have with them one-on-one as he would have preferred.[2] I would have written a meditation on how love and persuasion respond to the threat of force and violence, and how persuasion and the love of wisdom stand up to a seemingly timeless threat. Something of the sort may, somehow, emerge from what I do indeed undertake here.

Instead I shall make my reading one that means to speak to hermeneutics in our age because the *Apology* contributes to a sophisticated philosophy of communication still fitting our time. "The question of communication is," Heidegger tells his friend Medard Boss in one of the many letters they exchanged "of the greatest importance… in all essential matters."[3] After lamenting we do not reflect philosophically often enough on communication and thus do not have an adequate view of it, Heidegger goes on to write: "Socrates knew about this better that anyone else up to the present. But we hardly know anything of what he knew."[4] The *Apology* leads us to the heart of hermeneutical think-

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[1] For a wonderfully thoughtful meditation on fragility see: Les Amis, *Commemorating Epimetheus*, transl. Stephen Pluhácek (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2009).

[2] John T. Kirby, "The 'Great Triangle' in Early Greek Rhetoric and Poetics", *Rhetorica* 8, 3 (1990): 213–228.

[3] Medard Boss, *Zollikon Seminars*, transl. Franz Mayr and Richard Askay (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 240.

[4] Medard Boss, *Zollikon Seminars*, 240.

ing because language and speaking, understood in their broadest and also most profound sense, are linked with the inescapability of our being-together-with-one-another. Taken together they are what is central to the text in my reading.

I begin by inviting a voice unpopular among scholars, but insightful as to philosophy as a way of life. The classicist Edith Hamilton has the following to say about the Greeks of those centuries surrounding the life and death of Socrates. It is profound enough to quote at length because in its own way it highlights our concerns for a way of life in the face of fragility:

> […] to rejoice in life, to find the world beautiful and delightful to live in, was a mark of the Greek spirit which distinguished it from all that had gone before… The Greeks knew to the full how bitter life is as well as how sweet. Joy and sorrow, exultation and tragedy, stand hand in hand in Greek literature, but there is no contradiction involved thereby.[5]

Hamilton goes on to make clear that this way of being-in-the-world, this way of having interpretation guiding a way of life, comes neither from naïveté nor denial. Hamilton maintains that this orientation, which faces vulnerability and fragility squarely, does not negate life because she says, "the Greeks were keenly aware, terribly aware, of life's uncertainty and the imminence of death. But never, not in their darkest moments, do they lose their taste for life."[6] I want to suggest, by way of these few reflections on the *Apology*, Socrates would have us understand we deal with – that is, take it up into the meaningfulness of our shared living together – the imminence of what we might call the consequence of our ultimate fragility only by living and having lived well, which cannot be accomplished outside of communication.

We are, no doubt, familiar with the story. As we all know, the *Apology* recounts Socrates's public speech in his defence against the charges that he corrupted the youth of Athens (more of which below) and is guilty of impiety because he did not believe in the (proper) gods. For the purposes of the reading I undertake here, I should rather put it this way: the great philosopher Socrates is on trial more or less for talking too much and, in this constant talking, for saying things of which the authorities did not approve. The conflict of interpretations can have, as we all understand, dire consequences and the *Apology* is about that as well. The *Apology*, as a result, is Socrates having to talk himself out of having talked himself into trouble; perhaps this is a secret definition of hermeneutics and it has been with us since the beginning.

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[5] Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way* (New York: W. W. Norton and Sons, 1958), 22.

[6] Hamilton, *The Greek Way*, 22.

The words Socrates shares, and that we have handed down to us in the *Apology*, never fail to do, ironically no doubt, what Socrates said he seldom if ever in fact did *viz.*, teach us something. As we also understand, these words, that still mean so much to us today and promise their worth for many tomorrows, did not persuade the court before which Socrates found himself making his case. But their incredulity is not how we shall, of course, judge the values of these words. For us and our philosophical and communicative reflections on fragility, we shall take from the profundity of Socrates's words what the judges could not or would not hear.

I think one way to see how fragility functions communicatively in the *Apology* is to note how the accusers of Socrates threaten him with death in the hope he might recant, that he might, as it were, take back all that talk, take back all those questioning words that have brought this trouble upon him; they seem to believe the threat of death might bring his philosophical communicating to a close. From the very beginning Socrates has little doubt, it seems to me, that he is about to receive a sentence of death from this court (remember the closeness of the vote causes him no little surprise).[7] So clear is the near future to him, that the *Apology* becomes a profound meditation on death, as telling as the meditation on such in the *Phaedo*. If Socrates is defending his life, it is not because he fears the death with which he is threatened by his accusers, even though he does, as we shall see, fear another death, one they fail to see at first, but about which they (and we) will have the chance to learn.

Against this backdrop let us look to a few moments which we shall draw together from the *Apology* to orient our contemporary understanding of the philosophy of communication. Within the whole of life itself, Socrates notes, there exist many practices and human activities that admit among their practitioners the evaluation that some persons are better and some persons are worse at the activity in question: horse riding and cooking for example. These practices I understand him to say share something leading their practitioners to excellence, what I shall call *thoughtful preparation, rich circumstances, and fine equipment*. Socrates is amazed at how many persons accept these as necessary for many of the distinct parts of life if one wishes to be excellent, yet not for living a good life, nor for the whole of life itself.

Socrates is who he is because he cannot be persuaded the distinct parts of living take work, diligence, and carful practice to be excellent, but living itself does not. To counter this misunderstanding, I think Socrates suggests living well also demands for life itself

[7] Plato, *Apology*, transl. G. M. A. Grube and revised by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 35e.

the three endowments listed above; Socrates in the *Apology* shows us these endowments might make living well more, rather than less, likely were we to find thoughtful ways of engaging them together. It is here I understand him to say something which we might put in this way concerning how these three endowments relate to the hermeneutic care of the psyche or its synonym philosophy as a way of life:

1) we have *thoughtful preparation* by doing philosophy, which demands thoughtful preparation via conversation and education that always moves beyond mere training;
2) we have *rich circumstances* by having friends and living with one another, which provides interlocutors who, as hermeneutics teaches, provide a healthy distance from our own perspectives; and lastly I believe;
3) we have the *finest equipment* in having the heart our being-together indebted to language in its most profound sense, which provides the within which and condition for the possibility of philosophy, conversations, and the educative possibilities of our being-with.

However, as with other practices such as cooking and gardening, life takes practice – it takes doing, as it were, and yet at the same time it requires much undoing as well because we have often been ill-prepared to live well by adopting the habits of our early life.

After this way of looking at Socrates's life and what he thinks our living well entails, we see the power of his refusal to accept the terms of his possible release from the death planned by his accusers. He may go free and avoid their death sentence, we are told, if he promises to stop speaking to his friends and to other people, if he promises to stop raising questions in his constant talking, if he promises to stop his talking from pressing for responses beyond those he has already been given by those others with whom he has been in communicative relation. In a word: he could avoid death if he would give up once and for all the thoughtful pursuit of hermeneutics and education. However, this, as we can see, would already be a death to Socrates and an unbearable one unlike the hemlock-induced death that awaits him after the trial and which he famously suffers with grace.

It seems, then, Socrates fears death and does not fear death at the same time. This doubling is only possible, I submit, by the practice of hermeneutics. Not all things named the same are the same and not all things named with different words are simply different. Socrates has developed a way through conversation as hermeneutic practice to sort out which deaths he will not accept and which death he can embrace from within a well lived life. In some situations – being silenced or banished in exile for example – death is not to be avoided at all

costs. This is because, as Socrates attempts to show, the cost will be too high because the price includes the death of speaking well.

Passing through the *Apology* again with this in mind we encounter a related argument from Socrates showing us the centrality of our being-with-one-another and why what we talk about and how we manage to talk about it matters to us all. We find evidence of this, of course, in Socrates's famous claim that he would not willingly corrupt the psyches of the youth when his own fate is joined inextricably to theirs. This is a way of showing the radical political nature of the demand humans face to practice interpretation, a clear view to how our talking is a communal affair always and is so from the start.

In this rich sense, then, we see how essential it is to have our living together not abandoned to a crass individualism as a desperate and crass self-defence, but rather see the task of living well as a communal one, understood and shared through language. As Merleau-Ponty notes with a keen astuteness, Socrates does not "plead for himself… [h]e pleads the cause of a city that would accept philosophy."[8] Yet, accepting philosophy is one of the most difficult things to do because it goes against the grain of living day-to-day, as the practice leading to the charges against Socrates are evidence (this questionable status of philosophers and what they ask of us lingers still today).

Socrates embodies and thus shares with us a kind of sadness as his defence in the *Apology* begins, because he understands he and philosophy itself are unpopular and he knows why. We remember Socrates begins his speech lamenting the fact he is given only a short time to make his case while the slanders against philosophy have been going on forever. He is keen to remind his audience how freely the same old arguments are made against philosophers and thus against him (and against us by an ongoing extension). He has, as Hadot puts it, created by his communicative conduct a situation in which his fellow citizens: "could not help perceiving his invitation to question all their values and their entire way of acting, and to take care of themselves, as a radical break with daily life, with the habits and conventions of everyday life, and with the world with which they were familiar."[9] Contemporary philosophical practice still brings this type of wrath in its wake, of course, and this – it is not news to those who have tried – will not/cannot be easily overcome. Those who struggle to be the heirs of Socrates have long been made unwelcome in the contemporary agora. The slurs have not abated. Today finds no shortage of neo-liberal discourses out for their own vengeance, serving their own poison

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[8] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, 38.

[9] Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, transl. Michael Chase (London: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 36.

cocktails to those who think it better to think and converse meaningfully than not.

Hannah Arendt, when thinking about Socrates's thinking and what could come of such thinking and conversing, notes his challenges come without a readymade blueprint to supplant whatever he may have just undermined. Nonetheless, and here again we encounter the genius of Socrates, this nothing–to–put–in–its–place is not done in the name of nothing: "nihilism is but the other side of the conventional," Arendt writes.[10] I would say Socrates shows us if conventionalism has an absolute answer for everything, then nihilism has absolutely no answers for anything. Socrates would have us – we that is to say, who embrace hermeneutics as a rigorous philosophy of communication – as a party to neither of these choices.

Consequently, we need to occupy a hermeneutical place residing elsewhere than in either of these two extremes. We need to practice philosophy in a manner that is not a banal compromise. That place is in-between and echoes the understanding of Eros Diotima provided for us in Plato's *Symposium*. As Arendt describes Socrates's sense of this: "[…] [he] calls this quest for meaning *eros*… men are in love with wisdom and do philosophy because they are not wise."[11] Socrates knows a thing or two besides knowing he does not know. Eros occupies a space between the gods and mortals, a place to which we aspire by loving wisdom and the talk that shares this undying love with others. Loving this way, then, is what we should do.

To close, let us return to where Socrates begins his apology. He begins his speech – his apology for what we all gather to do who do the philosophy of communication – by speaking about speeches, those that came before his and the one he makes to defend himself, which turns out to be made on our behalf as well. Socrates's manner of opening his persuasive speech reminds us: all speaking is a speaking after, which is to say a response to something. We undertake our examinations together through language already spoken, but in need of being said again and otherwise. Talking to the end is what Socrates desires, it is this for which he asks – perhaps this is all the evidence we need to be persuaded of what is central to philosophy's vocation – when, between his death sentence and his hemlock, Socrates says to his friends: "stay with me awhile, for nothing prevents us from talking to each other while it is allowed."[12] What shall we do, then, we who teach, and write and, and think always about hermeneutics and communi-

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[10] Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations", *Social Research* 38, 3 (Autumn 1971): 435.

[11] Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations": 437.

[12] Plato, *Apology*, 39e

cation, in order to increase this allowance in our own time for such conversation?

It takes but a short measure of any afternoon to read the *Apology*. Indeed, in a long afternoon you could read this short text many times. And yet each moment of a life is needed to respond to its call, to embody its claims for philosophy as a way of life and care of the psyche, and to make the power of language resound in our being-together-with-one-another. It is not easy to respond to this call; nonetheless, we mortals are made for it because we are able to hearten one another by sharing a new take on some old words and thus embrace the thoughtful preparation, rich circumstances, and fine equipment philosophy offers all of us by being what it is. Our being indebted to language and living together with others already sets us on our way to talking ourselves into a taste for life not despite, but rather because it is fragile and vulnerable. In savouring this taste for living well, we shall understand ourselves as communicative beings capable of much that is fine (*kalos*) if we are able to keep worthwhile conversation alive and suffer the full range of the impending consequences, together, as friends of wisdom.

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Summary

Despite numerous cases of human endurance and survival, we remain fragile beings. We are unquestionably vulnerable and we have been so from the beginning: that is what finitude is. What is important is that the impression that such stories make on us is proof of how fragile and sensitive they are to our everyday

understanding. We are constantly exposed to the risk of physical and mental suffering. Heidegger says that an understanding of our fragility is always tacitly given as yet undefined and distant. Because of its crucial importance to who and how we are, we try to forget about it. However, if we recognize its importance to our life, we can understand that there is great virtue in our vulnerability and fecundity in our fragility.

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