

Tuomas Ansio

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Topic:

“Polus: So you’d rather want to suffer what’s unjust than do it?
Socrates: For my part, I wouldn’t want either, but if it had to be one or the
other, I would choose suffering over doing what’s unjust.”

(Plato, Gorgias [469 b-c]. Complete Works, edited by John M. Cooper,
associate editor D. S. Hutchinson. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing
Company, 1997.)

In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates is put in front of a difficult question by Polus: would he prefer to suffer unjustly than to commit injustice himself? Socrates' answer is brave: for him, to suffer injustice is always preferable to committing injustice, even if injustice would prevent suffering. This simple answer also reveals the motive of Socrates not escaping from the prison cell before his death. As in every text of Plato, the question is a really personal one. That means that implicitly Polus asks, what would **you** do Socrates? Thus it is not merely an abstract question, but rooted in real human existence (even if the events presented in the dialogues were not factually true). The personal, literary form of this question gives us the opportunity to handle Socrates' thoughts. So the basic principle here is, that fundamentally the question of Polus doesn't ask any universal guideline, but rather Socrates' personal commitment. In this essay, on the basis of Polus' personal question and the answer Socrates gives to it, I intend to sketch the stakes and the ways of philosophical activity, which are clearly seen against the background of Socrates' particular answer here and also a certain conception of philosophy as the concern with death. For Socrates' answer doesn't reveal only ethical propositions he thought to be right, but something about his own, and this way, also our own lives too.

We can suppose that the situations depicted by Plato in his *Apology*, *Phaedon* and *Gorgias* are factually real; real human beings in real situations. It is Socrates' own blood and flesh that is at stake in the question posed by Polus. We can also suppose, as Plato describes, that Socrates was a man of his word, and drank his poison with no complaints. It is easy to pose abstractly the thesis: it is always better to suffer because of injustice than to commit injustice to prevent suffering. But when it is not the abstract self and the abstract audience that the thesis is given to, but the real existent self, the thesis cannot anymore be seen as only floating out there in the sphere of abstract universals. When Polus asks Socrates his question, Socrates cannot and does not escape to the abstract, but ties himself to the soil on which he stands on, to use metaphorical language.

To proceed, we still need draw the implications that are posed by the concepts in the question posed by Polus, those of suffering and injustice. We shall not go lightly, but take the full implication of Socrates' answer. If it is always better to suffer because of injustice, than to prevent it, it means that even the most horrible, unjust sufferings one can imagine and those that have been imagined - the sufferings of Job in the Book of Job, or the monstrosities depicted by the greek playwrights - cannot give the permission to commit injustice. That means, that true justice cannot mean punishment or a payback. Even when the vulnerable skin is torn apart, or when the screams heard from the brazen bull are intolerable to hear, injustice is not to be committed. Socrates knew the implications of his answer very well. For he says: "For my part, I wouldn't want either (...)". By reading this, the reader of the dialogue can empathize with Socrates' position, especially when one knows the unjust trial and death sentence of the just man. Plato's literary style even demands emphatization. And through it arises the crucial question: Is this answer - that suffering because of injustice is better than to commit it to prevent suffering - possible for me? Does not a whole life depend on this question? Would I, the reader, be willing to live for an idea of justice so that, even if I had to live a life of Oedipus, I would not commit injustice, and even if it was the only way to prevent my suffering?

In his *Phaedon*, Plato says that philosophy is *melete thanatou*, the preparation for, or concern with death. Does Socrates derive his braveness from this view of philosophy? One should note here, that by the word death I do not refer to a natural process. Death is not merely a natural process that is a particular, empirical event in time than can be measured (f.e. when the heart stops bumping, when

the breathing stops, when the lips get cold etc.) No. Rather death is, phenomenologically speaking, a sub-phenomena of life, or the flip-side of the coin. For where I, my own living self is given, there's also given the possibility of my death. There is no single moment in human being's life, where death is not attached to his/her very existence. And how could there be? True are those words that a certain wise man once uttered: right after I'm born, I'm already ready to die. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger said that death is the most intimate (Heidegger uses the word *eigensten*, more literally translated as the most-own) possibility of Dasein (Heidegger's conceptualization of the human being). If then philosophy is, as Plato proclaimed, preparation or concern with death, it means at the same time, that philosophy is the practice of life with death, and thus life in general. For Socrates that means the practice and the concern for a life lived such that even death, which is the end of life, does not devalue life itself and does not lead one to commit injustice in front of suffering or fear of death.

The thoughts expressed above are of course easy to say from the ivory tower. But here one must remember to emphasize with the position of Socrates, and thus also one's own self. Earlier was asked: Is Socrates' answer possible for him, and for myself? Here I take Socrates' answer to be not only the literal answer given to Polus, but also his concrete action, his calmness before death. From this question, when keeping an eye on Plato's conception of philosophy, we can elaborate on the question question as follows: If philosophy is the practice of death and thus life, and one should not let the suffering to devalue one's life, how is life worth of living possible for Socrates and myself?

How is philosophy as the practice of death possible? What does it require from me? One needs to ask these questions from one's own self. Socrates gave his answer, and lead by example. His answer was: philosophy as the concern with death is possible for me (Socrates), when the life of mine is examined. For we remember Socrates' words: "The unexamined life is not worth living.". This means, worthy life is not possible without philosophy. Socrates' answer to our question of the possibility of that answer for him and for ourselves, could be formulated in the following manner: it is the only possible way to live a worthy life. It's not like Socrates doesn't know what suffering feels like, he sure does, and he also expresses this: "I wouldn't want either (...)". But he also knows that to live as he thinks ought to be lived, one cannot offer any other route. It is as if Socrates found himself imposed by fate. This nuance reveals, I think, the essence of the Socratic view of philosophy as deeply personal: his persona demanded him to go to a certain direction. Philosophy, which is the practice of death and examination of life, makes life worth of living; and for Socrates this means that injustice ought never to be committed. This is Socrates' answer, and he proved to be a man of his word. But the hardest part is yet to come, namely, the self-reflective one.

Spinoza, the great rationalist, had the following, sinister maxim: don't laugh, nor weep, nor hate, but understand. Understand what? Understand that injustice is never to be committed, even when one's whole existence is at stake? Socrates understood this, it is said. But none of the readers of this essay or the Platonic dialogues are Socrates. Only the answer of Socrates won't guide anyone too far. Since Polus' original question concerned suffering, let's proceed to a self-reflective practice, and try to emphasize with the already mentioned figure of Job. As is known, Job's family, and almost everything he owned, was diminished in a relatively short period of time. One could say that the ground was swept under his feet. Could I, emphasizing with Job's position, take Spinoza's word as true in this depicted situation? Could I take the words of Socrates to heart, that I shall not commit injustice, unfairness, curse God, but rather to examine life with a calm and understanding attitude? It is left for the reflector to decide, if it is possible. For it is not Socrates nor Spinoza reflecting on

suffering, but one's own self. Just in the same manner that Socrates himself reflected upon Polus' question. And however hard Spinoza's cold commands press at the back of one's head, one shall not take them as given and self-evident. For just to refer to Spinoza without the personal reflection, one abstracts the personal existence of one's own to a fleshless universum. In self-reflection, humans really live up to the label given to them by Aristotle, *animal rationale*, the rational animal. That is because one relies not on authority, but on one's own personal intellect.

The calm braveness of the examiner Socrates and of the geometrician Spinoza, versus the despair of Job creates tension, which is not to be solved through logical syllogisms. That is because the very nature of the question - with which we started, implicitly posed by Polus: what would **you** do? - is deeply personal. Since we are not able to dodge this question and to cast it into the abstract, it requires radical self-reflection, examination. Examination of the inner depths of the existing reader, the bones and the soul, cannot be left for someone else to do. It has to be one's own enterprise. Once more the analysis of Heidegger can be recalled, namely, the death as the most intimate possibility of a human being. Death is my death and no one else's. Each dies on one's own turn. But in so far as death contains life and the other way around, in so far as I reflect on death, I reflect on life. If, as Socrates says, unexamined life is not worth living and that philosophy is also practice of and concern with death, it is this kind of self-reflective life that was depicted above, that makes life worth living. Not to ask how, but rather **is** Socrates' answer and example possible for **me**? Only self-reflection - which is also concern with death as the most intimate possibility and thus examination of life - can lead to an answer. Not to take Socrates' answer to Polus' question as such, but rather to use the method of Socrates to find out the answer. We are, as Sartre said, condemned to be free. That means that neither Socrates, nor Spinoza, nor Job can save us from the demand posed by death and suffering. The demand presents these words: what would you do?

In this essay I've hoped to show, that if philosophy is the concern with the most intimate (namely death), it has to be personal to the core. It doesn't concern for example Kant's theoretical abstraction "I think" (which is merely a formal description of epistemological presuppositions), but it concerns concrete, lively existence. Every breath of a human takes priority over the formal abstraction. This personality of philosophy as examination of life the Greeks knew, and Socrates knew it really well. Philosophy for them was always also life, the art of living. One could say, as the early Heidegger did, the art of living authentically (again, Heidegger uses the word *eigentlichkeit*, which is closely related to the existent self and not to some universal or general authenticity). For Socrates, the examination of the depths of his soul led to the conclusion that authentic life requires justice even before the most horrible of sufferings, and that he took as his principle. But let not Socrates be the guide unless we reflect upon the demand aforementioned. For in philosophy, in concern with death, life is at stake. And the personal reflection before Polus' implicit question can guide us towards the principles of our own lives.