

Matters of life and death

The Death of Socrates - Socrates

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The Death of Socrates: Hero, Villain, Chatterbox, Saint

Author - Emily Wilson

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Socrates' legacy richly rewards our consideration, says Tom Palaima.

The two great challenges of human existence are how we spend our days and how we face the prospect of our deaths. Emily Wilson is right to identify "our increasing discomfort with death in general" as a factor in the general lack of interest, over the past generation, in the death of Socrates.

Twenty years ago Michael Lesy's *The Forbidden Zone* examined US denial of death and its consequences for the relatively small numbers of Americans who encounter death regularly: slaughterhouse workers, homicide detectives, undertakers, soldiers, carers of terminally ill patients, shochets.

The trivialisation in our current worldwide corporate culture of the two most important questions we face as reasoning beings - our own mortality and the purpose of our lives - is connected with the transformation of our universities into "career-credentialing stations". We reward professors for behaving like sophists rather than like Socrates, whose methods and purposes Luis E. Navia explores in his thoughtful study. I say this having reaped many of those rewards.

Socrates: A Life Examined and *The Death of Socrates* complement each other. What Navia, as a philosopher, misses in the primary texts and historical setting, Wilson, as a classicist, mostly provides. Wilson's historical sweep is fuller, as befits a book in Mary Beard's excellent Profiles in History series.

Read Wilson first to understand the intellectual developments of the 5th century BC and the political events during the last three decades of the not-so-golden age of Athens. These provide the context for the trial and execution of Socrates in 399BC. Wilson's advice for further reading about the themes of her individual chapters, including last year's *A*

Companion to Socrates in the Blackwell Companions to Philosophy series, brings Navia's extensive bibliography up to date. Except for his own general books on Cynic and pre-Socratic philosophers, Navia's most recent citation is I. F. Stone's well-known 1987 popular meditation, *The Trial of Socrates*. Further proving the uninterest of which Wilson writes is the sad fact that the best collections of texts and quotations about Socrates in English (published in 1964 and 1970) are out of print.

Both authors do a good job of examining the primary sources for Socrates: Attic comedy (chiefly Aristophanes); the philosophical works of Plato, including his account of the three-hour trial defence, or apologia, of Socrates; and the *Memorabilia* (or "Reminiscences") and *Apology* of the Athenian general, historian, biographer and essayist Xenophon. Plato and Xenophon had both been what we would call disciples of Socrates, although Socrates insisted during his trial that he did not have formal students.

The figure of Socrates and what we call Socratic thought have had an extraordinary influence on Western intellectual, ethical and philosophical traditions. Yet, in an Athenian culture that was still decidedly oral in nature, Socrates was as suspicious of the written word as he was of long speeches. Written texts cannot respond to our questions. Nor can we stop long speeches to examine their individual arguments and logic. Socrates wrote not a word of his own.

We divide classical philosophy into pre-Socratic and Socratic phases, the latter extending beyond Ancient Greek culture. Wilson devotes an entire chapter to how the figure of Socrates, whom the poet Shelley called "the Jesus Christ of Greece", is treated in Christian tradition. The Gospel of Luke models elements of the death of Jesus, whom Voltaire called "the Socrates of Palestine", on the death of Socrates.

Both Wilson and Navia contrast the positive vision of Socrates in the philosophy of Hegel with the negative view in Nietzsche. The latter, in Navia's words, saw the sophists, specialist intellectual teachers - literally "agents of the practice of using 'logos' (in this period, something like 'reasoned speech')" - as the "genuine representatives of the authentic Greek *Weltanschauung*" of *Übermenschen*. In *Plato's Apology*, Socrates denies that he is a sophist. Nietzsche agrees, but sees in Socrates a physically, and therefore morally, ugly "buffoon who got himself taken seriously", whose "plebeian and moralistic philosophy" destroyed the high classical culture that the sophists promoted.

Nietzsche's view has fallen out of favour. Socrates is now seen mainly as a courageous figure interested in serious questions about human conduct and willing to die for moral principles. During the Second World War, Karl Popper, as Wilson points out, contrasted Socrates with his star pupil and main witness, Plato. Platonic thought supported Western totalitarianism, Marxism and fascism. But Socrates stood for "faith in man, in equalitarian justice and human reason".

Wilson documents the depressing contemporary use of the figure of Socrates "to add a little extra cultural capital to self-help manual(s)". Symptomatic is Christopher Phillips's *Socrates Café: A Fresh Taste of Philosophy*, which serves up Socrates lite by combining "Socratic questioning with the charming geniality of the Oprah Winfrey show".

Wilson's analogy to Oprah is apt, and there is, ironically, more to it than she recognises. In his defence, Socrates rebuts the two charges that he corrupted young men through formal teaching as a sophist and that he does not believe in the gods of Athens. He argues that he is no teacher but a kind of talk-show host. He engages passers-by in the public places of Athens in discussions about things they would know - in Greek, all this is called *diatribai*, literally "whilings away of time". Socrates' main pastime had the kind of entertainment value now derived from cable television and YouTube. Because he attracted audiences, his views on various subjects were well known. He was therefore confident that he could prove that anyone who claimed he taught impiety was not telling the truth.

There, however, the analogy ends. As both Wilson and Navia stress, Socrates wanted to discuss meaningful topics, such as justice and virtue. His method, known as the *elenchus*, forced his interview subjects to examine their own assumptions and logic, the meanings of their words. This led to their public embarrassment, when they were forced to admit that they did not really know what they were talking about. One should stress that the word and its verbal form have a basic meaning of "belittlement". As early as our Homeric texts, these words are used of a kind of public disgrace or social shaming that public figures in 5th-century Athens felt much more deeply than celebrities and political leaders do in our shameless modern times.

Navia rightly sees Socrates' focus on ethics, his insistence on precise definitions of ethical concepts and his belief in the absolute link between knowledge and virtue as the revolutionary concepts that ultimately got him killed. In Navia's view, Socrates believed true wisdom, as the basis for deciding between right and wrong action, "must begin inexorably with the examination of one's self".

The oracle of Apollo at Delphi had declared to Socrates' friend Chaerophon that no one was wiser than Socrates. The oracle also displayed for all visitors, engraved prominently in stone, the message "Know yourself". The Greeks were interested in doing this from Homer's *Iliad* onward.

The tragedy of Socrates was twofold. First, he took this command to another level at a time when what Athenians desperately wanted was simple pieties and soft moral principles. Second, the inscription at Delphi could not respond to his questions.

But do not let Socrates' reservations about the written word keep you from reading these two thoughtful and informative books.

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