

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Oct '11

Nº 640

Herman L. Sinaiko, a beloved teacher in the College, scholar of Plato and Honorary Member of the Center, died Sunday, Oct. 2 in Hyde Park. He was 82.

He taught in the College for 57 years and served as dean of students in the College from 1982 to 1986, was known to generations of undergraduates as a thoughtful, rigorous and devoted teacher. He was also a passionate advocate for U of Chicago students, both inside and outside of the classroom.

“Herman Sinaiko was an enormously brilliant teacher who enriched and transformed the lives of the thousands of undergraduates whom he taught at Chicago,” said John W. Boyer, dean of the College. “He leaves a powerful legacy of service to the University and the College.”



SOCRATES AND FREUD: TALK AND TRUTH

Herman Sinaiko

Socrates and Freud—a strange pair! The ancient Athenian philosopher and the modern medical scientist—what do they have in common? In what reasonable sense could they be said to be the joint subject of a lecture? Of course, in view of the modern mania for comparing and contrasting anything and everything, Socrates and Freud are as good a pair to examine as any other. Both are major figures in the intellectual history of the West. Both were great innovators, protean thinkers whose influence has been deep and pervasive far beyond the limits of the issues they explicitly addressed. Both were deeply interested in the human psyche. But as soon as I say that, as soon as I move from abstract points of comparison to concrete subjects, the profound differences between them begin to emerge. For Socrates *psyche* seems to mean “soul” in all its diverse theological, poetic, and even commonplace meanings, whereas for Freud *psyche* takes on its characteristic and definitive contemporary sense of something like “the inner self.”

Rather than detailing the differences between the two figures, what I want to do is focus on a single, central feature of their activity as thinkers, a feature that they share with each other and that distinguishes them from all—and I mean all—other major thinkers across the whole span of Western thought. I am referring to the peculiar emphasis both of them place upon talk, discourse, conversation, dialogue. The extraordinary focus both give to this everyday activity is well known but has been too little contemplated. Indeed, it is frequently the basis for sharp criticism of the thought of both men. You can read in many textbooks on the history of philosophy how Socrates naively thought that it was possible to arrive at true definitions of the virtues or to discover the nature of moral principles simply by talking to people. Similarly, when Freud’s method of psychotherapy is called the talking cure, that description is not always neutral or complimentary; it often contains a slight note of contempt and derision at the absurdly self-limiting discipline of psychoanalysis.

What is interesting and important to note is that both Socrates and Freud were well aware that the ends to which they devoted themselves were not usually achieved simply by talking. In Socrates’ case, the pre-Socratic tradition of Greek thought included many thinkers who were profound observers of natural phenomena as well as of human social and political affairs. Freud, too, engaged in a great deal of scientific research, in the laboratory and clinical practice, in his early career as a neurologist and psychiatrist. The truth seems to be that both men, as they matured into the great thinkers we admire, deliberately restricted their respective pursuits

of philosophy and psychoanalysis to the single activity of talking. It was Socrates who brought philosophy “down out of the heavens into the marketplace” and thus defined his method of philosophical investigation as *dialectic*—that is, as “conversation.” It was Freud who rejected hypnosis, the laying-on of hands, and the empirical investigation of the objective facts of a case in favor of the rigorous and exclusive use of talk as the method of psychoanalysis.

Freud was so fanatical in his emphasis on talk, nothing but talk, that he invented the technique of having patients lie on a couch while the analyst sits behind them, so that they can’t see the analyst’s face and try to read its expression. In classical psychoanalysis, except for the unavoidable few seconds at the beginning and end of each session when the patient is in the process of lying down on or getting up from the couch, the analyst is essentially a disembodied voice. The effect is very similar to what many readers feel when they read Plato’s *Dialogues*. Frequently a dialogue begins with a lively, highly dramatic scene; but as Socrates takes hold of the conversation the dramatic hustle and bustle fades away, and soon all that is left is the sound of two or more voices talking back and forth in a kind of temporal and spatial void.

Socrates and Freud both knew, without doubt, that in restricting philosophy and psychoanalysis to mere talk, by excluding the other possible resources available to them, they were paying a heavy price. They knew this, and yet they did it. So far as we know, neither of them ever regretted it or reversed himself.

In these remarks I want to follow their lead; I want to transform talk from a commonplace phenomenon that we take for granted into an open question to be seriously reflected on. I will do so by looking at what Socrates and Freud each discovered about talk and what each did with and through talk. I hope thereby to begin to explore the power of talk, the way it can become not merely an important or even the primary technique but the sole instrument by which philosopher and psychoanalyst can pursue their ends.

For both Socrates and Freud the only end that counts, the end to which both of them bend their efforts, is the discovery of the truth—not a trivial truth about this or that but truth with a capital *T*, the truth about the nature of things.

Were they serious? Can mere talk be the privileged, the only, means to significant truth?

Let me begin with Socrates. He himself apparently wrote nothing;

we know about him only through the reports of others, reports whose pictures of Socrates are not always consistent with each other. I will develop my account of his understanding of discourse primarily from a few well-known, noncontroversial facts about him.

He grew up in the fifth century B.C. during the heyday of the Athenian empire, in what used to be called the golden age of Greece. In his youth he earned his living as a stonemason, like his father, and he probably worked on the Parthenon. At some point, probably when he was quite young, he became fascinated with philosophy, and from then on he seems to have spent almost all his time talking in the agora, the marketplace, of Athens. He seems to have given up stonemasonry and, as a consequence, become poverty-stricken. We do not know how he supported himself, but it seems likely that he was partly supported by some of his wealthy friends and followers.

Socrates lived in this fashion for many years. He married a woman named Xanthippe, whom later tradition portrays as a thoroughly unpleasant shrew. (This may be an injustice, for the contemporary evidence tells us very little about her.) Socrates had three sons with her, the last of whom was still a nursing infant when Socrates was tried and executed at the age of seventy for impiety and for corrupting the young.

Socrates, like all other able-bodied Athenians of his day, served in the army during military campaigns, and we know he fought in at least three battles. Like many other Athenians, he was highly critical of the extreme democratic government of Athens. But when that government was briefly overthrown by a despotic junta of wealthy aristocrats, Socrates, at direct risk to his life, refused to comply with their attempts to involve him in their murderous regime.

A member of the intellectual and cultural elite of Athens, he was a personal friend of Euripides, the tragic poet, and an acquaintance of Aristophanes, the comic poet, who publicly ridiculed him in his play *The Clouds*. He was a friendly rival and colleague of all the philosophers and sophists of his time—Protagoras, Parmenides, Anaxagoras, Gorgias. He may even have been a friend or an acquaintance of Pericles, the leader of the Athenian democracy at its height. He certainly knew intimately several members of Pericles' family, including Alcibiades and Plato. Though impoverished, he seems to have been regularly invited to the homes and dinner parties of the rich and powerful. Apparently he also spent much time

conversing with ordinary citizens and visitors to Athens—businessmen, artisans, politicians, performers, doctors.

A fascinating, compelling figure, he wrote nothing, established no schools or other institutions, engaged in no significant political activities, and associated himself with no particular intellectual or philosophical doctrine or movement. He was an interesting local figure, idiosyncratic, even eccentric, nothing more; like many other such figures throughout history, fated to be remembered for a while in amusing or sentimental anecdotes and then fade into obscurity.

But Socrates did not fade into obscurity. He became one of the most influential figures in ancient Greek thought, then Roman thought, then medieval Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thought, and finally modern thought. Every single school of philosophy in the ancient world directly or indirectly traced its origins to Socrates. Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics, Skeptics—all claimed Socrates as their founder. In the generation before Socrates and during his lifetime there was a flourishing group of thinkers in Greece called sophists. Socrates opposed them (although, through one of those ironies so common in the world, many of his fellow citizens in Athens apparently thought he himself was a sophist). By the time of his death Sophism as a distinctive intellectual movement had more or less disappeared—apparently because of Socrates' critique.

Already in antiquity, Greek thought was conventionally divided into two periods: pre-Socratic and post-Socratic. Unfortunately, we know very little about the pre-Socratic thinkers—Heracleitus, Parmenides, Democritus, among others. The impact of Socrates' thought upon his contemporaries and succeeding generations was so powerful that they seem to have stopped reading the works of his predecessors. The result was that their works became exceedingly rare within a few generations, and many disappeared altogether. Today we know the works of the pre-Socratics only in fragments, in odd passages quoted by later authors whose works did survive. Students of ancient Greek thought, myself included, mourn the loss of those pre-Socratic works. But I believe we must take seriously the judgment of those who knew Socrates that he effected a fundamental revolution in thought, a revolution so compelling that it rendered those earlier thinkers obsolete and established the intellectual tradition within which we still live today.

What did Socrates do or discover that so impressed his friends and followers? He is a mysterious, puzzling, even paradoxical figure,

hard to grasp not because his thought was so complicated but because it was so simple, not because it was hidden or esoteric but because it was so obvious, so public. The greatness, the profundity, of his thought lies in his discovery of what Alfred North Whitehead describes as “first principles almost too obvious to need expression, and almost too general to be capable of expression. In each period there is a general form of the forms of thought; and, like the air we breathe, such a form is so translucent, and so pervading, and so seemingly necessary, that only by extreme effort can we become aware of it” (*Adventures of Ideas*, p. 14). We still live in the period of thought initiated by Socrates, and that is why he remains so hard to perceive.

Scattered through Plato’s *Dialogues* there are a number of images of Socrates that help to catch the extraordinary quality of the man and his thought. In the *Meno*, Meno, a young Thessalian aristocrat—sophisticated, well educated, thoroughly lazy, stupid, and thoughtless—likens Socrates to a stingray, which paralyzes everything it touches (80a). Until he talked to Socrates, Meno says, he had always thought of himself as an articulate, knowledgeable, self-confident young man. After half an hour’s conversation with Socrates he finds himself tongue-tied, confused, frustrated, unsure of himself and of his opinions. Socrates, he says, paralyzed his mind the way the stingray paralyzes the body.

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates describes himself to Theaetetus, a young mathematician, as an intellectual midwife, analogous to his own mother, a physical midwife. The ordinary midwife, he says, has two functions: to preside at the birth of a child or, if the woman is suffering from a false pregnancy, to relieve her of the illusion that she is going to have a child. Socrates says that he performs the same function for ideas, helping those whose souls are pregnant with ideas to give birth to those ideas or, if they are not pregnant, showing them that there are no ideas ready to emerge. And like the midwives who help with the birth of babies but are themselves infertile, Socrates says that he can help others give birth to their ideas even though he himself is intellectually sterile, with no ideas of his own (149a–151d).

In the *Apology*, in which he unsuccessfully defends himself against the capital charges of impiety and corrupting the young, Socrates likens the city of Athens to a noble horse, very beautiful but a little stupid and slow-moving. He describes himself as a gadfly, sent by God to irritate and rouse the city from its mindless slumbers (302c). An intellectually paralyzing stingray, a midwife for the offspring of the soul, a stinging gadfly for his community—these

catch something of what it meant to encounter Socrates.

But there is a fourth image of Socrates in Plato's writings. It occurs in the *Symposium*, an account of a dinner party at which the host and his guests give speeches in praise of love. Alcibiades, perhaps the most brilliant and talented of Socrates' young men (with the exception of Plato himself), comes late to the party, and he comes drunk. He gives the last speech of the evening, and he discusses, not love, but Socrates. Socrates, he says, is like the figurines of the satyr Marsyas that are sold in the shops of Athens. Outwardly these are statues of a short, potbellied, bulging-eyed, ugly little man, but, says Alcibiades, they are cleverly hinged so that they can be opened, and inside there are beautiful images of divinity. Socrates and his words are like these statues: outwardly ugly and ordinary; inwardly, containing rare treasures and images of the divine (215a–215c). I think Alcibiades' image of Socrates best captures the quality of the man and his talk that I am trying to evoke.

What were Socrates' words like? What did Socrates say that was so compelling to those who could see beyond the prosaic surface? What was there in those conversations with local politicians, artisans, poets, visiting philosophers, and wealthy young men that revolutionized Western thought?

In the *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero described Socrates as “the first to call philosophy down from the heavens, establish her in the cities of men, and introduce her even into private houses, and compel her to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil” (V.4.10). The remark has been repeated so often that it has become a cliché, but what did Cicero mean?

The great task for the so-called pre-Socratic thinkers was to find the fundamental ground and principle of all things. Typically, those thinkers asked questions about the nature of the cosmos, what we call the universe—the whole of everything that is. They wanted to understand being itself, to grasp with their minds the nature of things; and they called their enterprise philosophy.

According to Cicero, Socrates was interested in the same thing, engaged in the same enterprise, but he decisively shifted the locus of investigation. He sought knowledge of the nature of things, not in the universe around us, but in the opinions of men. Or, to put it differently, he apparently thought that the key to understanding the nature of things lay, not in the external world of material things, but in that world as it includes human beings and as it appears to the human soul. More precisely, Socrates seems to have argued

that the key to understanding the nature of things lies in the world as it appears to the one particular soul that is most important to each of us—our own. He never tired of quoting the injunction of the god Apollo that was inscribed in stone over the entrance of his temple at Delphi: “Know thyself.” Socrates said many times that everything he did was devoted to fulfilling that single task—gaining self-knowledge—and until he had done so, he had no time for any other pursuit or activity.

What does it mean to know thyself? And why does every other human activity pale to insignificance beside it? To begin with, self-knowledge is different in kind from all other knowledge. In the search for self-knowledge we are both the object of the search and the one who does the investigating. But can we fail to know ourselves? Are we not more intimately knowledgeable about ourselves than about anything else in the world? Is not the very notion of seeking knowledge of the self intrinsically absurd or at least paradoxical?

This Socratic quest for self-knowledge is perhaps the single most difficult and problematic of all human endeavors. Probably the most difficult aspect of the enterprise is to understand that, appearances to the contrary, we are not knowledgeable but profoundly ignorant of ourselves. It is this profound ignorance of ourselves that was Socrates’ great discovery.

When the god Apollo said “Know thyself” to those humans who came to ask questions of the oracle at Delphi, he originally meant something specific and achievable. The wise and immortal god says to each of us, “Know yourself as a mortal, finite, limited human being; know yourself to be ignorant of what the future will bring, to be forgetful of the past, to be weak and more or less incompetent to deal with the demands of the present. Most of all, know yourself to be a human being and not a god. Know that you are an actor in a drama of which you are not the author or director, a drama that is sometimes tragic and more frequently comic, and that the best you can achieve in life is to understand and accept your fundamental limitations.” Fully articulated, this understanding of human existence is the one embodied in classical pre-Socratic Greek culture, in the statues of the gods, in the serene and harmoniously ordered architecture of the great temples, and, most of all, in the lucid and brilliant writings of the poets—Homer and the Attic tragedians.

What Socrates discovered in his search for self-knowledge goes far beyond this traditional Greek understanding of what it means to be

human. In our everyday lives, in our actions and reactions, and especially in our deeply held beliefs about the world, Socrates discovered that we are in touch with things whose existence we absolutely take for granted but whose nature remains mysterious. Let me illustrate what I mean. If I ask you, “Is it true that two plus two equals four?” you will undoubtedly answer, “Of course, Everyone knows that.” But if I then ask you, “Since you are so sure it is true to say that two plus two equals four, perhaps you would be so good as to tell me what truth is?” You will not, I think, answer this question without some hesitation and uncertainty. If you are sophisticated and learned in these matters, you may be able to tell me what Aristotle or Heidegger or Descartes said about truth, but whether you are sophisticated or not, if I continue this line of questioning, you will eventually fall into confusion.

This problem—and it is a problem—is not confined to questions about truth; it holds equally for such notions as beauty, goodness, justice, and knowledge and even for such seemingly obvious terms as *equal*, *like*, and *one*. Every general term that we use in ordinary conversation becomes opaque when we stop using it as if we understood it and instead subject it to direct examination.

Not only does each of us use these terms all the time, in whatever language we happen to speak, but when we use these terms we mostly seem to understand one another. It is by the use of these mysterious but commonplace terms that we articulate our understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live.

Without these terms and the uses we put them to, we would instantly revert to the condition of the mute beasts; we would lose our humanity. “Man,” says Aristotle, a spiritual grandson of Socrates, “is the animal who talks” but by “talk” Aristotle doesn’t mean the grunts or barks with which animals communicate fear or desire or other information. By “talk”—the Greek word is *logos*—Aristotle means the words, the statements, the arguments about our opinions—opinions about what we should do, why we should do it, what the true facts in a situation are, and so forth. Talking is what we humans are doing when we use these mysterious terms that we understand and do not understand. Socrates seems to have investigated these terms, to have tried to explore with his interlocutors what they meant by them.

Let me be very clear here. I do not mean to suggest, as many scholars have done, that Socrates was only interested in finding definitions for general terms, particularly the terms of moral discourse, such as *goodness*, *courage*, *moderation*, and *virtue*. He was

primarily concerned with the realities they point to, the phenomena they articulate. That is, he explored those terms as they are used by human beings in the contexts of their lives. Socrates talks about truth and knowledge, for example, with Theaetetus, who has just made a significant mathematical discovery. He talks about the teachability of virtue—that is, human excellence—with Protagoras, a famous sophist who claims to be able to educate young men and to make them better people. He talks about justice with the jurors at his trial—jurors who will shortly be making a decision about whether he, Socrates, has committed an injustice.

Hence, a Socratic conversation is never idle talk about ideas or concepts; it is always deeply serious, though frequently laced with wit and humor. The talk is serious because it is about issues central in the lives of the people with whom he is talking. Socrates engages us in conversation in the context of the fundamental concerns and commitments of our lives and, through conversation, undertakes his investigation of himself and helps his interlocutors, if they are willing, to investigate their own lives—that is, to seek jointly with Socrates for self-knowledge.

And what comes of this investigation of the self? What is the result of this lifelong search for who and what we are, for what we are doing and why, for what we should be doing and how we should do it? Throughout his career, up to the very last day of his life, if Plato's testimony is accepted, Socrates made only one substantial claim to knowledge of himself. "I know," he said, "that I know nothing." This claim in all its arrogance and modesty, with its perfect irony, embodies the whole of Socrates' wisdom—a wisdom, he himself suggests, that is the most we humans can attain.

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.