

The Hemlock Dialogues

Imagining Socrates's Final Thoughts

Stan Baronett



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PREFACE

The Hemlock Dialogues imagines Socrates's final thoughts as he lay dying in his cell after drinking the cup of hemlock. *It is, therefore, a work of fiction.*

The book imagines Socrates's final reveries as they blaze through his mind, flitting from one setting to another as he nears death. An important goal was to show Socrates as a simple and honest man. It does this by recreating conversations in which Socrates subjects other people's ideas to examination. But it also reveals Socrates's acknowledgment that his own ideas need to be subjected to self-examination, which is the hallmark of Socrates's life.

This recreation lets readers see Socrates as an open and generous thinker, not as one who has all the final answers. Imagining Socrates's final internal thoughts charts a new landscape in which to explore some of his most important conversations.

When the jailer entered the cell carrying the cup of hemlock, Socrates said, "My good friend, since you are experienced in these matters, please give me directions how I am to proceed." The jailer answered, "After you drink the potion you simply have to walk around until your legs start to feel heavy, then lie down and the poison will act." Socrates took the cup, raised it to his lips, and drank the poison. Seeing his friends becoming quite emotional, Socrates said, "In order for me to die in peace, please be still and have patience."

Following the advice of the jailer, Socrates walked slowly around the cell until his legs began to fail, then he lay down on his back. After a short while, the jailer pressed Socrates's foot and asked if he could feel anything. "No," said Socrates. Little by little the numbness spread upward through Socrates's legs. "When the poison reaches the heart, that will be the end." Socrates's last spoken words were, "Crito, I owe a small debt to Asclepius; will you see that it is paid?" Crito assured him that he would, and asked Socrates if there was anything else. There was no answer.

≈ ≈ ≈ I listened carefully as my accusers made amazing claims against me; but nothing of what they said is true. I was particularly intrigued by their warning the jurors not to be seduced by the force of my eloquence. I'm surprised they can say that and not blush, because as soon as I begin presenting my defense you will see that I lack the ability to deceive. My simply telling the truth to you will be the only eloquence I have. You will hear the whole truth, spoken in simple terms, without the adornment of flowery phrases that distract the mind from sound judgement. Since I will present arguments that go directly to the heart of the matter under consideration, all I ask is that you grant me one favor. If you hear me using the same words in my defense that I have been in the habit of using everyday, then don't be surprised. I am over seventy years of age and, since this is the first time I have appeared in a court of law, I am a stranger to the ways of the court. I ask you to think only of the justice of my cause, and since I swear to speak truthfully, you must swear to decide justly.

There have been many accusers in my life, and their false accusations started long ago. They claimed that I was a skeptic who used fallacious reasoning, and that I taught others how to win an argument at any cost, and that I did not care about right and wrong and justice and injustice. These long-time accusers are the ones I dread most because I cannot question them here. I'm sure that some of them are among those who serve as jurors in this trial. So be it. I can fight only with their shadows, and pose questions

when there is no one to answer.

To begin, let me say that if someone has the ability to teach, then I honor that person for being paid. But there is no truth to the claim that I am a teacher who takes money for instruction. In fact, I have nothing to teach anyone. Now probably some of you will say, *“But then, Socrates, where did these accusations against you originate? All this talk about you would never have arisen if you had been like other men.”* I regard this as a fair challenge, and I will try to explain to you the origin of my evil fame.

If you ask me what wisdom I have, I reply, a wisdom that is attainable by any human. I refer you to a witness who is worthy of credit, and who will tell you about my wisdom—whether I have any, and of what sort—and that witness is the god Apollo. Some of you are already familiar with the story. But for those who are unaware of it, the story will provide not only an explanation for my public behavior, it will also reveal my reverence toward Apollo.

What happened was that my friend, Chaerephon, went to The Temple of Apollo at Delphi and asked the Oracle about me. According to the Oracle, Apollo decreed that no human was more honest, more temperate, or wiser than me. Since I hear many murmurs of dissent among the jurors, perhaps my story shocks some of you; some probably disbelieve it, while others react out of envy that I, among all men, should receive such praise from Apollo. If what she said was true, then it shouldn't be doubted. But as we all know, sometimes the Oracle speaks in riddles. If so, then perhaps I needed to find a way to

solve the riddle to reveal the full meaning of it. But how should I proceed? I decided to use the pronouncement as a guide to my actions in my daily conversations. I would investigate, point by point, what Apollo meant.

When many of my friends heard about the Oracle's pronouncement, they claimed that the characteristics mentioned were not couched in a riddle at all. *"As far as the first point, Socrates,"* they said, *"no one is more honest than you in your dealing with others. Further, no one is less enslaved than you to the appetites of the body. And no one is wiser because you are always willing to listen to anyone's opinion, and are eager to learn from anyone who claims to have knowledge. Those who make virtue, wisdom, and justice their pursuit choose to associate with you. Many people purchase delicacies of the market at great cost, but you, Socrates, are content with the delicacies of virtue, knowledge, and wisdom."*

Of course, it is always gratifying to hear praise from those who know you intimately. But whether their opinions are true is another matter; one that I needed to test for myself. You might ask why, if I accepted Apollo's decree as true, did I need to pursue it further? Again, I could not get it out of my mind that the Oracle might have posed Apollo's decree as a riddle. The ironic part is that my effort to solve the riddle is why I have such an evil reputation.

After long deliberation, I was able to think of a method to understand the riddle. I considered two points. First, the Oracle said that I was the wisest

human of all. Second, I firmly believed that I was not wise. Imagine that you were in my position; wouldn't you be puzzled by this result? And wouldn't you think that perhaps the Oracle's answer shouldn't be taken literally? I see some heads nodding in agreement. Therefore, my course of action was clear. If I could find even one person wiser than me, then the true meaning of the Oracle's pronouncement might finally be revealed. If I found someone wiser than myself, then I would go to Apollo with a refutation in my hand. I would say to him, "*Here is someone who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest.*" Perhaps my honest and determined pursuit would get Apollo to reveal the answer to the riddle.

My first step in the investigation was to go to a politician who had a reputation for being wise—his name I need not mention. The result was that when I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and wiser still by himself. So, I explained to him that although he thought himself wise, he was not really wise. As you can imagine, the consequence was that he hated me, and his hatred was shared by several others who were present and heard me. I left him, saying to myself as I went away, "*Although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything, I am better off than he is because he knows nothing, but thinks that he knows, while I neither know nor think that I know.*" It struck me that perhaps this was the answer to the riddle. Maybe what Apollo meant was that I am wise simply because I neither know nor

think that I know, while others delude themselves into thinking that they know when they clearly do not know. It is in this, then, that I seem to have the advantage of others. Perhaps this is the particular wisdom that Apollo meant.

Although this was a good start to my pursuit, I couldn't stop because there were so many others to seek out for their purported knowledge. I went to someone who had a high philosophical reputation, but my conclusion was exactly the same as with the politician. Sadly, but perhaps not unexpectedly, I made another life-long enemy. Not wanting to give up in my search, I went to one person after another, not realizing the full extent and depth of the animosity I had provoked. But what else could I do? After all, the word of a god should be our first consideration. Who among you would denigrate a pronouncement by Apollo? Your shaking heads tell the answer. All who proclaim reverence to the gods would do exactly as I did. If not, you would be rejecting the possibility of a just and honorable life.

I resolved to seek out all those who had a reputation for knowledge, to find out the true meaning of the Oracle. And I swear to you—for I must tell you the truth—the result of my mission was that I found those with the greatest reputations were the most foolish. As you can imagine, my investigations over the years led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind.

I am aware that a few people believe I am wise. They imagine, incorrectly, that I have a wisdom that I find lacking in others. I came to realize that what