The Last Words of Socrates at the Place Where He Died

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For example:

The Last Words of Socrates at the Place Where He Died

March 27, 2015  By Gregory Nagy  listed under By Gregory Nagy, H24H

§1. In H24H §45, I quote and analyze the passage in Plato's Phaedo 117a–118a where Socrates dies. His last words, as transmitted by Plato, are directed at all those who have followed Socrates—and who have had the unforgettable experience of engaging in dialogue with him. He tells them: don't forget to sacrifice a rooster to Asklepios. […]

§2. I will quote the whole passage in a minute. But first, we need to ask: who is this Asklepios? As I explain in H24H §§29–33, he was a hero whose father was the god Apollo himself, and, like his divine father, Asklepios had special powers of healing. More than that, Asklepios also had the power of bringing the dead back to life. That is why he was killed by the immortals, since mortals must stay mortal. But Asklepios, even after death, retained his power to bring the dead back to life.

§3. So, what does Socrates mean when he asks his followers, in his dying words, not to forget to sacrifice a rooster to Asklepios?

§4. On 16 March 2015, the group participating in the 2015 Harvard Spring Break travel study program visited the site where Socrates died—and where he said what he said about sacrificing a rooster to Asklepios. On the surface, this site is nothing much to write home about. All we can see at the site is the foundation stones of the State Prison where Socrates was held prisoner and where he was forced to drink the hemlock in the year 399 BCE. But I feel deeply that, just by visiting the site, our group managed to connect with a sublime experience. We were making contact with a place linked forever with the very last words of one of the greatest thinkers in world history.

§5. I now quote my own translation of Plato's Phaedo 117a–118a, which situates these last words of Socrates:

"Go," said he [= Socrates], "and do as I say." Crito, when he heard this, signaled with a nod to the boy servant who was standing nearby, and the servant went in, remaining for some time, and then came out with the man who was going to administer the poison [pharmakon]. He was carrying a cup that contained it, ground into the drink.
Socrates saw the man he said: "You, my good man, since you are experienced in these matters, should tell me what needs to be done." The man answered: "You need to drink it, that’s all. Then walk around until you feel a hell. Then lie down. This way, the poison will do its thing." While the man was saying this, he handed the cup to Socrates. And Socrates took it in a cheerful way, not flinching or getting pale or grimacing. Then looking at the man from beneath his brows, like a bull—that was the way he used to look at people—he said: "What do you say about my pouring a libation out of this cup to someone? Is it allowed or not?" The man answered: “What we grind is measured out, Socrates, as the right dose for drinking.” "I understand," he said, \[117c\] "but surely it is allowed and even proper to pray to the gods so that my transfer of dwelling [met-oi-kēsis] from this world [enthende] to that world [ekelēse] should be fortunate. So, that is what I too am now praying for. Let it be this way.” And, while he was saying this, he took the cup to his lips and, quite readily and cheerfully, he drank down the whole dose. Up to this point, most of us had been able to control fairly well our urge to let our tears flow; but now when we saw him drinking the poison, and then saw him finish the drink, we could no longer hold back, and, in my case, quite against my own will, my own tears were now pouring out in a flood. So, I covered my face and had a good cry. You see, I was not crying for him, \[117c\] but at the thought of my own bad fortune in having lost such a comrade [hetaires]. Crito, even before me, found himself unable to hold back his tears: so he got up and moved away. And Apollodorus, who had been weeping all along, now started to cry in a loud voice, expressing his frustration. So, he made everyone else break down and cry—except for Socrates himself. And he said: “What are you all doing? I am so surprised at you. I had sent away the women mainly because I did not want them \[117c\] to lose control in this way. You see, I have heard that a man should come to his end [teleutān] in a way that calls for measured speaking [euphēmeiν]. So, you must have composure [nēsukhē], and you must endure.” When we heard that, we were ashamed, and held back our tears. He meanwhile was walking around until, as he said, his legs began to get heavy, and then he lay on his back—that is what the man had told him to do. Then that same man who had given him the poison [pharmakon] took hold of him, now and then checking on his feet and legs; and after a while he pressed his foot hard and asked him if he could feel it; and he said that he couldn’t; and then he pressed his shins, \[118a\] and so on, moving further up, thus demonstrating for us that he was cold and stiff. Then he [= Socrates] took hold of his own feet and legs, saying that when the poison reaches his heart, then he will be gone. He was beginning to get cold around the abdomen. Then he uncovered his face, for he had covered himself up, and said—this was the last thing he uttered—“Crito, I owe the sacrifice of a rooster to Asklepios; will you pay that debt and not neglect to do so?” “I will make it so,” said Crito, “and, tell me, is there anything else?” When Crito asked this question, no answer came back anymore from Socrates. In a short while, he stirred. Then the man uncovered his face. His eyes were set in a dead stare. Seeing this, Crito closed his mouth and his eyes. Such was the end [teleutē], Echecrates, of our comrade [hetaires]. And we may say about him that he was in his time the best [aristos] of all men we ever encountered—and the most intelligent [phronimos] and most just [dikaios].

So I come back to my question about the meaning of the last words of Socrates, when he says, in his dying words: don’t forget to sacrifice a rooster to Asklepios. As I begin to formulate an answer, I must repeat something that I have already highlighted. It is the fact that the hero Asklepios was believed to have special powers of healing—even the power of bringing the dead back to life. As I point out in H24H 24§46, some interpret the final instruction of Socrates to mean simply that death is a cure for life. I disagree. After sacrificing a rooster at day’s end, sacrificers will sleep the sleep of incubation and then, the morning after the sacrifice, they will wake up to hear other roosters crowing. So, the words of Socrates here are referring to rituals of overnight incubation in the hero cults of Asklepios.

§6. On 18 March 2015, the group participating in the 2015 Harvard Spring Break travel study program visited a site where such rituals of overnight incubation actually took place: the site was Epidaurus. This small city was famous for its hero cult of Asklepios. The space that was sacred to Asklepios, as our group had a chance to witness, is enormous, and the enormity is a sure sign of the intense veneration received by Asklepios as the hero who, even though he is dead, has the superhuman power rescue you from death. The mystical logic of worshipping the dead Asklepios is that he died for humanity: he died because he had the power to bring humans back to life.

§7. So, Asklepios is the model for keeping the voice of the rooster alive. And, for Socrates, Asklepios can become the model for keeping the word alive.

§8. In H24H 24§47, I follow through on analyzing this idea of keeping the word from dying, of keeping the word alive. That living word, I argue, is dialogue. We can see it when Socrates says that the only thing worth crying about is the death of the word. I am about to quote another passage from Plato’s Phaedo, and again I will use my own translation. But before I quote the passage, here is the context: well before Socrates is forced to drink the hemlock, his followers are already mourning his impending death, and Socrates reacts to their sadness by telling them that the only thing that would be worth mourning is not his death but the death of the conversation he started with them. Calling out to one of his followers, Phaedo, Socrates tells him (Plato, Phaedo 89b):
“Tomorrow, Phaedo, you will perhaps be cutting off these beautiful locks of yours [as a sign of mourning]?” “Yes, Socrates,” I [= Phaedo] replied, “I guess I will.” He shot back: “No you will not, if you listen to me.” “So, what will I do?” I [= Phaedo] said. He replied: “Not tomorrow but today I will cut off my own hair and you too will cut off these locks of yours—if our argument [logos] comes to an end [teleutân] for us and we cannot bring it back to life again [ana-biōsasthai].

What matters for Socrates, as I argue in H24H 24§48, is the resurrection of the ‘argument’ or logos, which means literally ‘word’, even if death may be the necessary pharmakon or ‘poison’ for leaving the everyday life and for entering the everlasting cycle of resurrecting the word.

§9. In the 2015 book Masterpieces of Metonymy (MoM), to be published both online and in print, I study in Part One a traditional custom that prevailed in Plato’s Academy at Athens for centuries after the death of Socrates. Their custom was to celebrate the birthday of Socrates on the sixth day of the month Thargelion, which by their reckoning coincided with his death day. And they celebrated by engaging in Socratic dialogue, which for them was the logos that was resurrected every time people engage in Socratic dialogue.

I go on to say in MoM 1§§146–147:

For Plato and for Plato’s Socrates, the word logos refers to the living ‘word’ of dialogue in the context of philosophical argumentation. When Socrates in Plato’s Phaedo (89b) tells his followers who are mourning his impending death that they should worry not about his death but about the death of the logos—if this logos cannot be resurrected or ‘brought back to life’ (ana-biōsasthai)—he is speaking of the dialogic argumentation supporting the idea that the psūkhē or ‘soul’ is immortal. In this context, the logos itself is the ‘argument’.

For Plato’s Socrates, it is less important that his psūkhē or ‘soul’ must be immortal, and it is vitally more important that the logos itself must remain immortal—or, at least, that the logos must be brought back to life. And that is because the logos itself, as I say, is the ‘argument’ that comes to life in dialogic argumentation.

Here is the way I would sum up, then, what Socrates means as he speaks his last words. When the sun goes down and you check in for sacred incubation at the precinct of Asklepios, you sacrifice a rooster to this hero who, even in death, has the power to bring you back to life. As you drift off to sleep at the place of incubation, the voice of that rooster is no longer heard. He is dead, and you are asleep. But then, as the sun comes up, you wake up to the voice of a new rooster signaling that morning is here, and this voice will be for you a sign that says: the word that died has come back to life again. Asclepios has once again shown his sacred power. The word is resurrected. The conversation may now continue.