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Monothematic Block: Socrates in the 20th Century

Guest Editors' Introduction

More than anyone else, Socrates is *the* pivotal figure of the Western philosophical tradition. According to Cicero, "Socrates was the first who brought down philosophy from the heavens, placed it in cities, introduced it into families, and obliged it to examine into life and morals, and good and evil" (*Tusculan Disputations*, V.4). This is to say that Socrates' turning to the human things and to the speeches by which we attempt to understand them made him the founder of political philosophy, as well as of explicit ethical reflection on human life.

Never having written anything, Socrates' reputation has resonated across the centuries through the portrayals of his students Plato and Xenophon, as well as through the parodic depiction of him in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. The majority of ancient philosophic schools originated either from Socrates' students, or in a direct confrontation with his philosophic heritage. Pierre Hadot understands these schools as attempts to conceptually grasp the phenomenon of Socrates, and to establish rationally justified ways of living happily on this basis. Thereby they emphasized the *practical* dimension of Socratic philosophizing, which has been more or less forgotten in modernity.

Socrates was unproblematically understood as the founder of the philosophic tradition up to the 19th century – but the very tradition he founded worked to obscure his personal uniqueness and his insights. The first returns to Socrates were undertaken by Hamann, Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche; and Heidegger's "uprooting" of the Western tradition brought a decisive new impulse to reflections on Socrates. Although Heidegger himself didn't write much about "the purest thinker of the Occident," as he once called him (*Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 8, p. 20), Socrates is central to the thinking of many of his students, especially Leo Strauss, Jacob Klein, and Jan Patočka. We find important reflections on him also in the works of Hannah Arendt, Hans-Georg

Gadamer, and Gerhard Krüger. Beyond this tradition, the figure of Socrates proved highly influential for thinkers such as the aforementioned Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault, or Alasdair MacIntyre.

The goal of this monothematic block is to provide a variety of perspectives on the singular phenomenon of Socrates in the philosophic thought of 20th century. We would thereby like to approach a synoptic view of how his legacy was received against the background of the two World Wars and totalitarian regimes. Four of the papers in this monothematic block focus on the reception of Socrates in the phenomenological tradition, widely understood.

Robert J. Dostal's paper discusses the pivotal role of Plato's Socrates and his practice of dialectics and "second sailing" in Hans-Georg Gadamer's thought. The focus on Socrates as the model of philosophy as an open and dialectical practice enabled Gadamer to reject Heidegger's critique of Plato and so to bring Plato and Heidegger together.

Antoine Pageau-St-Hilaire treats Hannah Arendt's Socrates as the citizen-philosopher, or as the model of "the *forgotten compatibility between philosophy and politics*," as he writes – a model forgotten as early as Plato. This model is a construct, or an ideal type, whose purpose is to serve as a corrective to what she perceives as Plato's disdain for politics as actually practiced, which for her is the genuine site of human freedom and truth-disclosure.

Jozef Majerník explores how Jan Patočka's understanding of Socratic ignorance led him to recognize the Socratic practice of "care for the soul" as questioning thinking as *the* model of the philosophic life. The Platonic Socrates was for him also a crucial example of political action proper to a philosopher, and so inspired Patočka's own political action in becoming one of the first spokesmen of the Czechoslovak dissident movement Charter 77.

David Janssens takes up the place of Socrates in the work of Seth Benardete, one of the greatest students of Leo Strauss. Benardete builds on Strauss' central insights, such as the importance of Aristophanes for understanding the problem of Socrates, or the foundation of Socratic – or *political* – philosophy in "noetic heterogeneity." Benardete, moreover, discovered some of the characteristic features of Socratic thinking hidden already in Homer.

The final paper, by Peter Šajda, considers Martin Buber's complex evaluation of Socrates from the perspective of his dialogical philosophy. On the one hand, he sees Socrates as an eminently dialogical figure; but on the other hand, he considers the Socratic relation to the divine and to our fellow human beings as inferior to those championed by the Jewish tradition.

Taken together, these papers show that the figure of Socrates has not lost anything of its perennial charm and potential to provoke serious reflection on philosophy and human life in general. At the same time, they aim to invite the reader to an engagement not just with Socrates himself, but also with these 20th century thinkers, for each of whom he had proved such a productive interlocutor.

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Guest Editors