

**Edited transcript of: »Sources of Creative Power«
Lecture [XIII] (S-II)
5/7/54
Part III [Socrates]**

When Socrates came to realize his ignorance saying ›he knew that he did not know‹ he really knew everything. In his [Apology](#) he tells the story of how a friend had gone to the temple at Delphi and asked the God the silly but suggestive question, because he had prepared it for the God to answer in a certain way:

›Is there any man wiser than Socrates?‹

to which the God replies

›No. – There is no man wiser than Socrates.‹¹

And he also tells how frightened he became upon hearing the reply, because he had never thought himself to be wise and he knew of the irony of the gods. Many people had foundered, because they did not know that the Oracle could never be understood if they did not know and understand themselves. That was the condition, and so he had to ask himself exactly what was he to make of the answer of the Oracle? The danger was great. All Greeks (and not only Socrates) were very superstitious about one thing. They distrusted their gods.

There is a wonderful anecdote about a man who is about to walk out of a house where a celebration is going on. At the very moment he leaves the house it falls down and everyone is killed. What is the mans reaction? He looks up to the heavens and says:

›Oh Zeus, what are you sparing me for?‹

This ›Oh Zeus, what are you sparing me for?‹ is the engrained skepticism of the Greek race and it shows itself most strongly in Socrates. That is why he makes his own interpretation of the Oracles answer.

¹ Plato: [Apology 21a](#).

›Yes, the Oracle says no man is wiser than Socrates, and the Oracle is right. No man is. I know that I do not know. They all only think that they know. They do not know that they do not know.‹²

If he had accepted being the wisest of men he would have agreed that he really was a wise man, not only the wisest, but he saw and knew that nobody can be wise. We will hear the same thing centuries later when Jesus of Nazareth says to a man, who asks him:

›Good Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?‹

and Jesus answers:

›Why do you call me good? Nobody is good but God.‹³

That is what Socrates says to his judges. No one is good but God. We do not have that wisdom. We cannot be sophists. We cannot teach the truth because we do not have the truth. All we can do is realize that this is our predicament and take up the possibility of following and really establishing the truth. That means to understand that freedom becomes possible only under the conditions of absolute uncertainty.

It was [Schopenhauer](#) who said that the basic qualities of man are dumbness and laziness. Of course they are, but the conclusion to be drawn from that is not that life isn't worth living. We can also draw the Socratic conclusion: Namely, that if this is what we basically are then we have a big chance to overcome it, and if we do overcome it then it is we who have done that and not the gods. It has not been given to us. That is the irony of the Greek gods and in that irony is contained the secret of freedom. We do not see any comparable irony in Abraham's God, even though it is still there. Because if the gods have made us good, if it is they

² Plato: Apology 21b-24b.

³ Mark 10:17-18.

who have given us absolute truth or the possibility of reaching absolute truth, then everything we do would be done automatically as if we were machines, because we couldn't help ourselves. We would be wise, because we couldn't help being wise, which would be a boredom that can only be compared to hell. It means we wouldn't be human.

Socrates decided that he wanted to be human. He did not want to be a god, because he did not understand how a god could possibly live with all of that wisdom, therefore he became ironical and decided that we cannot logically say anything about the absolute wisdom of an absolute mind. Every time we try to account for such a state and explain it we always stumble over the question as to how such a being could enjoy itself, because it is not free and nothing that it does is done out of any merit. It is above all of that. It would be bored, though God is certainly not bored, so it all only means that we cannot possibly know or understand the conditions of an absolute being or an absolute mind.

It is exactly this knowledge of our non-knowledge that Socrates wanted us to start with. This knowledge that we do not have the truth, that we are not wise, and that we can only become wiser step by step handling each case on its own merits. And at this point a very amazing thing happens. This man, who denies he can teach, suddenly starts teaching. What he does is two things that can clearly be recognized in the Platonic dialogues. The first, is when he meets those big talkers like the Sophists who claim to know the truth and say they can teach it. To them he says:

Well, you see, I am not such such a brilliant fellow as any of you. I haven't even learned how to make a speech, as a matter of fact, I can't make a speech. I can only ask questions. I ask myself questions, I ask you questions, and since you are so wise will you please answer my questions?⁴

and of course they can't.

⁴ Plato: Apology, 17a-17c.

He does the same thing with his students but here he interrupts his performance and suddenly the man who pretends that he cannot make speeches makes one of the most brilliant orations we can find in all of history, but still, he is not an orator. Instead, he discovers something. What he does is to sit down in the company of other men (and we must remember that he never had students because he called them his companions) and after a long period of self questioning and of questioning them makes what appears to be a speech. He pretends that somebody has said something to him and so he tells them a long story. He is still not talking. Rather what he is really doing here is sitting and reading his own mind. He is opening his mind to them.

He is thinking out loud.

And that is what makes the speeches as Plato has rendered them so tremendously impressive. If we compare them with the greatest oratory in the world like the [funeral oration of Pericles as rendered by Thucydides](#), we still find that they have one quality more, and this quality is exactly that he is not an orator. That he has only this one capability of sitting and reading his mind out loud, thinking out loud in one straight line of reasoning while the others sit watching. Watching that is, not him, but rather his mind. They are watching a human mind working in one straight performance.

These then are the two things he does and he uses both methods alternating from one to the other, but he is very very stingy with the last one, because before he can read his own mind he must first clear the path to find the inherent capabilities of reasoning in the others. This 'clearing of the path' he calls dialectics.

He does this because he knows that the truth can only be approached in community. The lonely thinker may be very good but if he does not even test out his thoughts before an audience of peers who can think with him then he might fail, because reasoning and the acquisition of judgement can only be done with other persons. That is his conviction and that is his practice. The others are called his companions precisely because through this act of thinking he has prepared the way to draw them into his company.

What this all means is something very ironical. It means that as soon as human beings recognize their basic predicament of non-knowledge then they discover their capabilities of reasoning and judgement. Man cannot have the truth but in this ›not having‹ they can begin to judge things and to make things truer. They can become more wise and proceed creatively through the use of their reason, and reason here means philosophical reason, that is, the power of judgement. Not reason in the scientific sense as [Heraclitus](#) first discovered it. Reason in the sense of Heraclitus is something that is dictated to us, because we can discover the law of events in nature and therefore the reason for things in nature. This reason we call ›causes‹ and we can find them, because nature moves according to a minor logos. Our own logos, that is, our own reason is a higher one precisely because it involves the capacity of judgement. This reason manifests itself in all human affairs and Socrates cared only for human affairs, because as we said before, he discarded all of the fields that belong to science. He doesn't care for them. The only science he takes into account is medicine, because that is the science where the logos of nature in the human body meets the logos of the mind, the higher logos. There he still

shows a little bit of concern but that is all. He doesn't even care for art although he loves art. Rather his only concern is for pure philosophy and he is the only one who pursues this way completely. He is never mixed up. He only moves according to the principles of pure philosophic thinking, to the human logos, to human reason, and to nothing else.

Now, he is able to prove what Heraclitus could never prove. Namely, that this higher logos of man is infinite.⁵ How? By observing a simple fact: Men have the capability of sitting together and arguing with one another about the best reason that can be found to do such and such. They can design their own deeds and if they do it according to this higher reason, philosophic reason, then whatever proofs they are able to give in support of their own ›reasons‹ are proofs of philosophy. Someone will say ›let us do this for such and such a reason‹ and then someone else will try to find a still better one, and then they can compare and find a reason that will finally prevail. This capability of man is infinite and it guarantees the establishment and creation of something in the world that is more meaningful, more beautiful, more just, more courageous, and more judicious than had ever existed before it. It means that men, by their deeds, can establish and create facts in the world and therefore they can create truth in the world. Truth can exist within themselves, even though they do not know the truth.

These are all ideas with him and according to Socrates man is a maker of ideas. He does not say, like Plato, that there are eternal ideas and man tries to participate in them. No! Man is always a free maker of ideas, an inventor, and this is exactly what Socrates discovers. Men live by ideas. They are permanently producing ideas. Let us not address ourselves solely to the quality of those

⁵ See Sources of Creative Power (S II) Lecture IX, regarding Heraclitus' concept of »infinite logos«.

ideas but also to the fact that men are permanently producing them. They are idea producing beings and that makes for their transcendence. The only question is how are these ideas to be produced? They can be produced reasonably or they cannot. They can be great ideas and wise ideas or they can be foolish ideas and small ideas. The criterion is just this discussion of reason. If we move according to philosophic reason (not merely according to rationality for rationality is not reason) always keeping in mind that we can have it out with each other, always looking for the best reason, always asking ourselves if it brings more freedom, more justice, more beauty, and more meaning into the world? Because if it does, if it contains a deeper meaning in itself, then it might approach absolute meaning, and if so, then let us do that, let us follow it. This is the simple thing that he discovers. This capacity of reasoning things cut together in order to create meaning by making ideas and approaching, truth by going in the direction of truth. Truth means here only the capability of bringing a deeper and higher meaning into things and the world. To make things just, to make matters just, to behave more justly, more freely, and more truly. That is the way to approach absolute truth and we all have this knowledge in ourselves. That is what Socrates tries to prove. The knowledge given to man is just this restricted knowledge. Not the absolute knowledge of the gods but the logos by means of which we can approach the Absolute. He does not mean goodness (although he himself sometimes calls it goodness). He means wisdom, he means truth.

Now Socrates and Abraham are especially related to each other in their thinking. Abraham was a man of pure faith (not pure conviction, which we should call philosophic faith but rather what

we usually call faith, religious faith). So being a man of pure faith and a great religious thinker he makes this absolute concept of a God Creator which gives us the most reasonable religion possible and that has yet shown up. His God reasons with him. The power of judgement that is possible in every man is already practiced by Abraham. It remained only for Socrates to discover that this was the central capability of man (and not just of the few exceptions), and in discovering this central capability of man, this capability of moving according to reason, of moving towards truth and wisdom, he discovered another thing. He discovered that the practice of reason leads to faith.

First, to philosophic faith, which is not really faith but rather the conviction by which every man convinces himself that there is a meaning to Being and that every other person has the power of judgement, because if a man begins the practice of philosophizing he cannot avoid becoming convinced that he and every other person has this power. If man can create meaning then there is not the slightest doubt any more that there is a meaning to Being because how else could man create meaning? This proof of Socrates is absolute so when [Jaspers](#) speaks today of philosophical faith he is still a little muddled as are most philosophers on this issue. There is no faith required in philosophy. Only the courage of Socrates to take upon oneself the absolute uncertainty of man and then go the way of pure thinking and start philosophizing. As soon as this courage (or what I called the decision for freedom) is there and is made then the conviction that there is a meaning to Being grows and can never be entirely rejected. Socrates did this for us. He wanted us all to go the way of judging and philosophizing because he was convinced that every human being should be a philosophical being. Otherwise he cannot become a free human self. He did not teach philosophy. He practiced philosophy and he wanted us to practice philosophy. In

going this way he gains faith or at least he approaches faith. He comes so close that if he were to take another step he would leap right into faith (which, if he ever doubted divinity although he says he never doubted divinity, would be quite possible). He approached philosophy in this way and as his life went on his faith became even stronger although he still takes the skeptical precaution of the philosopher never to talk about. Rather he does a much better thing.

Friedrich Nietzsche once said that if we were to consider the Homeric and Orphic religions as well as all of the other cults that prevailed in Greece, there was one thing that struck him most about them when compared to all of the other religions in the world and that was the tremendous ingrained gratefulness and gratitude of the Greeks.⁶ This gratitude for having life, for having been given life, under whatever conditions was best manifested in Socrates. Plato thought it was necessary to at least say there is a life after death and a place where the souls will be judged and transformed. Socrates does not speak about the transformation of souls or even of souls. He says (and it sounds rather skeptical although it is also joyful, because it is spoken in the manner of the ancient Talmudists with which Greek thinking at its best has much in common):

⁶ Probably: »Die Geschlechtlichkeit, die Herrschsucht, die Lust am Schein und am Betrügen, die große freudige Dankbarkeit für das Leben und seine typischen Zustände – das ist am heidnischen Cultus wesentlich und hat das gute Gewissen auf seiner Seite. – Die Unnatur (schon im griechischen Alterthum) kämpft gegen das Heidnische an, als Moral, Dialektik.« Nietzsche, Friedrich: Nachgelassene Fragmente, NF-1887,11[35]. Bluecher might find the quote in: Nietzsche, Friedrich: Der Wille zur Macht, Leipzig 1939, S. 682. <http://library.bard.edu:80/record=b1025648>.

›If there is a life after death that is fine, because then I can carry on forever this important discussion about what truth is, what justice is, what courage is, and what freedom is. I will be able to do it with more enlightened men than myself, with Heraclitus and Homer and all of the heroes and wise men of former times. They will all have to answer me.‹⁷

That means he intends to be a gadfly⁸ in heaven too. Not only Just to have died in Athens and no longer have the opportunity to to that cursed gadfly which he always was, telling the people ›You are not wise, you only think you are wise,‹ showing them, provoking them, trying to wake them up to the realities of the inner human and creative life; but also to be that gadfly in heaven and this is the only way he can think of heaven.

Or, he says:

›I die and everything is over. Everything is forgotten, and that is fine too, because I have had such a tremendous labor in my life that it will be a good sleep.‹⁹

It all sounds very ironical but let us just for a moment translate it into religious language and see how it fits. In that sense, he says:

›I thank you God for having given me life regardless of the conditions, be it so or be it so. With life hereafter or with no life hereafter, it has been good.‹

Then, it becomes one of the greatest religious confessions that has ever been made, and what he says contains this confession in its ironical form but there is a condition to it and also an allowance. Because if divinity grants him life after death he is not as ambitious as Plato. Even after death he does not ask

⁷ Plato: Apology, 40e-41c.

⁸ Socrates was called a gadfly because of his permanent questioning.

⁹ Plato: Apology, 40d-e.

to become divine or to be anything more than what he has been created to be. After death he wants and expects only to be Socrates again – a human being philosophizing under better conditions perhaps, but not a god, not something divine. Even THEN he doesn't want to become superior, he doesn't want to have another quality, and this also belongs to his inherent gratitude. This is his religious confession, the best one a philosopher has ever made, and it adds to the absolute quietness with which he meets death. He designs for himself within this situation a death that could not have been designed better and he designs it consciously. You can see it clearly in those three dialogues. First, he meets his death halfway and then, he shakes hands. By that he confesses to say:

›This is the right moment for me to die because this is my highest deed. Once more I can give meaning to life and manifest truth.‹

So he really dies happily and he is about the only person we know of historically who can convince us that he really did die happily.

I cannot see how anyone can avoid this conclusion if he reads the Platonic dialogues. The death is so completely described as having been creatively designed by the person himself. He has looked into himself, he has questioned himself and tried to know himself, and finally he has found himself which means he is happy, because Socrates definition of happiness (which ironically he took up from all of the common people) is only to be able to live with oneself but to do that one must first have found oneself. You can

see how ironically he handles all of those who say to him that they want to be happy. How he shows them that they don't know what they want because they don't have the slightest conception of what happiness is and that they will change their mind about what they think will make them happy every day. That even if they could be made happy in the way they now wish it they might in the end become most unhappy, because the gods are very ironical.

I think all of that is true and it has been experienced by everybody. But Socrates had a very definite opinion about what happiness can be because he discovered the Self. The creative Self that every man can become: Namely, Man, and every man is not Man but can only become Man. He can BECOME this absolute Self as God had intended it to be, and he can become it by making peace with himself and by creating a living peace within himself. If a man can show that he is able to live a long life with himself, that he can endure himself, that both he and himself can come to have a liking for each other, then that is the greatest achievement a man can have, and this achievement is happiness. Happiness is the harmony with oneself, not just the peace, but the harmony and this harmony has been reached by Socrates and that is his testament to us that we can also reach it.

We cannot reach it by only conversing with ourselves psychologically. We have to converse with others and that means really converse, not just discuss, because all of these are matters that can never be known but only approached. But if we can approach then in thought and deed, because in philosophy thought and deed are the same, then we will have accomplished our creative work. From

there all of the other creative work of man can be lightened, can be related to it, because there is no other creative work possible either in science, art, or love without this central knowledge. Here is the source that nourishes all of them.

Socrates had come to the center and found this source, and from the center a constellation became possible. At first it was an artificial constellation, a metaphysical one, so we have had to go back to the center and hold on to it in order to find possible ways of creating a new constellation. Without Socrates no step would have been possible in that direction. This is what he did for us.

Next we will discuss Jesus of Nazareth, the late comer in our row of original thinkers, who would have been impossible without Socrates, because after the discovery comes the joy, and after the power of Judgement which is the central power of the human mind comes the power of the human heart, or what [Pascal](#) called the »reason of the human heart«. It could only be a late coming development. Everything else, so to speak, had to be there before this last message of joy could be heard. All of those in whose footsteps we have been following were messengers of joy, but none perhaps greater than Socrates, who could die so gladly, so quietly, and so peacefully, because he knew that from that moment on man could not forget himself entirely any more, because he had looked into himself and found his greatest capability.