

The Syssition

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Epic Threads

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Artist's Statement

I have been thinking about Socrates for some time. Originally, my interest was in Plato's style and the purpose of dialogues – one does not write such fictions *faute de mieux*. Dialogues are neither the most efficient nor a necessary form for conveying philosophical ideas in a simple manner, I thought.¹ It is through the so-called Tübinger Schule² that I came to understand the psychagogic value of Platonic dialogues: they do not merely refer to philosophy, but they also stage and are philosophy in action.³ What we perceive as frustrating or out of place makes better sense once we see their performative function. From this perspective, the character Socrates becomes a powerful narratological and argumentative device. His *eironeia* is as much a dramatic catalyst as it is a pedagogical tool. It invites emulation, even through rejection. This or that slightly irritating trait of his is what brings the dialogues closer to the reader and makes them operative. We *should* react and become aware of our attachment to certain values and assumptions. In fact, my pastiche found its origin precisely in such a reaction. As for its aim, it is twofold.

First, there is a methodological purpose. *The Syssition* was an attempt at what one may call experimental ancient philosophy. Just as experimental archaeology helps us understand certain aspects of ancient material production, imitating an ancient philosophical textual practice helps us understand what the dialogic medium makes possible (and what it does not). Experimenting with the philosophical dialogue made me realize, for instance, how easy it is to drift too far into fiction and overuse its narratological potential. Plato's famous use of myth and analogy now seems remarkably restrained to me, even realistic. Another outcome was my realization that the character of Socrates offers a powerful springboard not only for inquiry but also for self-examination, while imitating his irony diminished the arrogance I had originally perceived. Indeed, by trying to re-create fake ignorance for the sake of building an argument, one ends up realizing that one actually was quite ignorant. Maybe true *eironeia* is only partly feigned.

The second aim is exploratory: I wanted to see how easily the dialogic format and method can morph into Hellenistic philosophy by way of Socratic stock topics. What would happen if Socrates entertained Epicurean ideas or adopted a quasi-Aristotelian approach to discuss *akrasia* ("weakness of will") and *orexis* ("appetite"), that is, topics central to the Peripatetics?⁴ They turned out to feel like very natural evolutions of the Socratic matrix. While the artistic licence inherent in parodies might seem to offer a blank cheque for all kinds of playfulness or self-indulgent erudition, what in fact makes a good pastiche, I contend, is the seriousness of its engagement with the model it imitates.⁵ Rather than being a mere jocular copycat, such an exercise should ideally constitute a genuine literary and philosophical effort. It is my hope that the *Syssition* can champion this ideal in a manner commensurate with its scope.

I wish this piece to have both apologetic value and protreptic force: let us praise and reclaim this genre again in (the history of) philosophy. It could – and indeed still can – be a legitimate philosophical medium.⁶ After all, what if Plato's dialogues themselves were pastiches of Socrates' practice?

¹ Given what is at stake epistemologically or politically, the price of "mere" literariness would be very high. Plato also did not hesitate to lecture publicly on the Good in non-periphrastic and allegedly unappealing ways (Aristoxenus, *Harmonics* II.39–40 da Rios; see Gaiser 1980).

² On the Tübinger Schule, see the introduction of Szlezák 1993.

³ Pierre Hadot (a distant source of motivation for writing this piece) highlighted this formative rather than informative function: dialogues are a "concrete and practical exercise [...] guiding an interlocutor to a certain settled mental attitude: it is a combat, amicable but real" (Hadot 1987, 34; trans. Davidson 1990, 477). Plato's emphasis on the living (NB: not spoken) word appears in the *Phaedrus* (274b–276a).

⁴ On Socrates in Epicureanism, see De Sanctis 2022.

⁵ It should be stressed that the *Syssition* is not written in Greek (yet!). It deliberately imitates the slightly odd, heterogeneous, and at times archaising style of translations. Since parodies make readers see the 'stage', as it were, my idea was to highlight our difficulties instead of smoothing them out, and thus question the contemporary mediation of Plato's dialogues. Alfred E. Housman pursued a similar goal in 1883 by composing a parody of a fragment of tragedy, translated into ancient Greek by David S. Raven in 1959.

⁶ Ancient pseudoeptigraphy might have shared a similar agenda, at times (see Morand 2024). Contemporary parodies of ancient literature generally lean towards facetious exercises, e.g., the pseudo-anonymous 31st character of Theophrastus (Immisch et al. 1897; Fortenbaugh 1978; Bartels 1968) or the fake Aristotelian treatise 'On Trolling' (Barney 2016). Likewise for pastiches of scholarship, such as the encyclopedia entries on *apopudobalia*, i.e. football (Meier 1996; cf. the entertainingly merciless review of Marzullo 1997), or tomatoes (Leven/Wenskus 2005), although their derision might also suggest serious disciplinary self-criticism. *Les Chansons de Bilitis* (Louÿs 1895) likewise implicitly performs both. More explicitly satirical is Veber's recent blogpost (2026). Binmore 2021 presents a creative use of philosophical dialogues not primarily aiming at parody.

The Syssition

*Socrates mortuus Socrates nihilominus.
Socrates dead is still Socrates.*

Euglossos

Mithaikos, what a surprise! I was thinking about you the other day. How are you?

Mithaikos⁷

Delicious friend! I have had a very satisfying day so far. And my good fortune does not seem willing to depart. May I ask what made you turn your thought toward me?

Euglossos

Of course. But I do not intend to hold you back by saying hello. Am I delaying you?

Mithaikos

Not at all. Please, tell me more when we sit down by the river in the shade of that olive tree there, for I need to quench my thirst. It is the end of the afternoon but there seems to be no way to appease the sun. And the cicadas invite us to rest.⁸ Is it not luscious?

Euglossos

By Asklepios, you are right! It does truly feel like the halcyon days for my body and I should take a break before I go and practice for the next festival. As to your first question, I must give you some context. I have recently met one of our mutual friends, maybe you remember Terpsion⁹? Well, he told me about an interesting discussion he had had with Socrates some years ago. Let me try to report the whole of it to you as he told it to me, for “eating only the best bits is of little value to the starving”, as the saying goes.¹⁰ The story is not long anyway.

Mithaikos

Please, grant me the entire meal, by Dionysos! I am a starving ignoramus. And here is the olive tree.

Euglossos

So be it. Thus spoke Terpsion to me:

“My dear Euglossos, every time I start or finish eating I must recall what Socrates once told me, years ago. By sheer good fortune, we were both waiting for the rain to stop at the door of Glykosialos, the wine merchant, when he suddenly addressed me.

- Do you like the smell when it starts to rain, my dear Terpsion?
- Very much, Socrates.
- It stimulates the appetite, doesn’t it?
- Sure. I wonder why, now that you say it.
- Let’s try to unravel this mystery, shall we? For the rain will not cease just yet.
- By all means!
- First of all, we should attempt to define the nature of appetite.
- You speak rightly.
- Isn’t it so that appetite corresponds either to a need or to a desire?

⁷Mithaikos was a chef, known from Plato, *Gorgias* 518b6.

⁸Emphasis on the setting and the embedded reports of discussions are hallmarks of Plato’s dialogues – I draw inspiration in particular from the beginning of the *Phaedrus*, here.

⁹Present at Socrates’ death (*Phaedo* 59c2), Terpsion is also a character of the *Theaetetus*. I silently conflate, probably unhistorically, this Terpsion with the teacher of the Sicilian Archestratus, author of a versified culinary book (the *Gastrologia*).

¹⁰Not attested, unfortunately.

- Indeed, but I am not sure that I understand the difference.
- Well, surely we have different types of appetite. I'm quite certain that you don't wish to eat every day the same meal. Am I not right?
- Of course.
- And how would you distinguish the appetite for different or specific foods from the appetite for food as such, say, when you're simply starving, if not with terms like 'desire' and 'need' respectively?
- I would not, Socrates! Those are the appropriate words. Please, continue.
- Now, tell me: is the appetite triggered by rain a need or a desire?
- A desire, I would say, since I have just eaten – and sufficiently at that. Hence, it cannot be a need.
- We agree on that, then. But the need for food is a matter of both quantity and variety, am I not right?
- You must be. Do not hesitate to explain yourself, though. For I see why quantity should play a role, less so variety. Is this not part of our desire for different aliments, rather than part of our need?
- You're right to ask. But variety is also part of any natural diet, in so far as a single type of aliment is not sufficient to sustain our body in the long term. We need variety for the sake of basic health, in fact. Therefore, variety as such can't be considered a distinctive feature of our desiring appetite only.
- So it seems, yes.
- Quality, not variety, could be the distinctive criterion of our desires for food, then. Now, it would be absurd to say that we want good food one day and bad food another.
- It would be nonsense, clearly. We want to eat good food whenever we can and bad food as rarely as possible, methinks.
- Aye. So, it's not quite quality in terms of good or bad food we're looking for {it's always the best we want} but quality on some other account, which doesn't solely rely on variety either, as we've seen. Good and varied food isn't all we want when we experience a desiring appetite. Perhaps we could tackle the issue from a different angle: what is it that satisfies such an appetite? If we could find what it is, we might also be able to define more easily what is satisfied by it, don't you think?
- I would guess so, yes. Proceed!
- It seems, then, that appetite as desire is particular: if I want a warm and rich stew, it's unlikely that I'd be happy with a crisp salad with smoked trout, although both can be tasty and substantial. My desire wouldn't be satisfied, whereas the need for food would probably disappear after either of them, and surely after both. Or am I wrong?
- You certainly are not!
- Excellent. We can now define appetite as either a general need or a particular desire. The former is natural necessity and thereby depends on quantity and variety. The latter gives a particular goal or direction to that necessity and it relates to a specific meal.
- It sounds right, Socrates. But how is this helping us with our issue? I do not see the point.
- Don't be so hasty! Are you suddenly in a hurry or what?
- Your mention of stew has triggered my appetite and now I am longing for a warm and cosy dinner. I am sorry.
- Don't be, Terpsion. Apparently, you, maybe more than anybody else, can't easily overcome what for most is merely a secondary supplement to the necessary need for food: the desire to taste.
- Is this to say that I am not free from my desires?
- It is indeed, I daresay, esteemed and godlike friend. But you don't have to be saddened by that, you know. It's a luxury.
- How could I not be sad when you bring me to realise that I am a mere stomach and some taste buds?! Are you being clever, O Socrates?

- Well, there's no need to reduce yourself to those only. They form a part of you, for sure.¹¹ No one would deny that. But there are other parts of you, right? The way you manage your needs and desires in general is more important than the fact that you've got them.
- Thank you, Socrates, but do not try to fool me. You said that I, more than anyone, cannot control them! I do not see why I should rejoice in being my own slave. Or did you not say that?
- I did, but you're listening to some fear for your self-esteem rather than to my words. Relishing a sufficient, good, and particular meal is natural – and indeed irresistible, if you ask me. Hence, not longing for such a thing is a waste of one's capacities to experience and taste the world. Of course, if you weren't able to bridle your desiring appetites, then you'd be your own slave.
- I thought that was what you said.
- It could have been. But you're still here and you haven't run to the Agora or to the Prytaneion to beg for food, from what I can see. The truth is, you're longing for wisdom more than for any particular food.
- It seems you know me better than I do.
- I don't even know myself! But back to our business. Concerning appetite as desire: why do we want a juicy roast one day and quiche another?
- You tell me! But, please, enough of the menu.
- Clearly, neither variety nor quantity is a distinctive cause. We've established this much. In fact, I could desire to eat cod two, three, or four days in a row, and possibly even half portions, although it would fulfil neither my need for variety nor the necessary quantity. I personally think the causes are properly speaking external.¹²
- Now I see where you are heading, Socrates!
- Possibly. Isn't it so that we generally wish for a warm meal when it's cold and a cold one when it's hot outside?
- Obviously.
- Such relations are easy to establish because they're fairly evident. The relation between rain and any more specific meal we are both surely dreaming of right now is less clear, however. But there probably is one.
- Can we be more precise?
- I could, but this isn't the right time for long explanations.¹³ For now, we need only secure the following: our desire for specific foods is somehow linked with our external environment.
- That much, at least, is clear, I agree.
- In sum, appetite as desire is relative as well as particular. But I told you before that not using our natural sense of taste to its proper extent – and this must somehow also entail a readiness to try new flavours – amounts to wasting one's abilities. I think it's even a dangerous neglect of our relation to the world, even a kind of vice. For, given what we have said, it would surely be both ridiculous and wrong to concede that desiring appetites stem from the body and external factors, and yet exclude the relation this very body has to the world, would it not?
- I certainly think it would, by Atē! You have just given an example of that. But even so, would you mind clarifying the matter for me?¹⁴

¹¹The function of the body in Plato is manifold: parallelism with the state's structure in the *Republic*, vessel of the soul in the *Phaedo*, cosmological interpretation of the head's shape in the *Timaeus*, source of aesthetic distraction in the *Symposium*, even the locus of authorship or responsibility (in the palinody of the *Phaedrus*).

¹²The role of external stimuli and goods will be important in Aristotle's ethics and eudaimonism (e.g., MM II.8 = 1206b30 ff.) but they already have important implications for the responsibility of one's action (a topic crucial to Socrates) in Plato.

¹³Socrates' communicative strategy in Plato often conveys information in such a way as to frame it out of immediate semantic reach (e.g. through myths or analogies) or indeed delaying or withholding it altogether.

¹⁴Phatic as they may appear, the interlocutors' unease often grows during the dialogues and the maieutic process. Their answers are therefore essential to follow the concrete effect of the conversation and their engagement with the matter.

- Let's take the story of Tantalus,¹⁵ doomed to suffer the most living of sufferings while dead: hunger. His punishment for having served his son Pelops as meat for the gods and for having tried to steal their immortal food was to suffer hunger forever: sustenance doesn't sustain him; it escapes him. Tantalus therefore never comes to perceive appetite as desire, only as need – as a need that can never be fulfilled. And, more interestingly for us, he's wholly focused on his needs, rather than on the world around him. Tantalus is obsessed with himself at all times. Yet he can't take care of himself, for the external goods he so painfully craves are of no avail to him; they only worsen his need. He cannot have any fulfilling relation to his external world, deathlessly starving in front of food. In a way, Tantalus' true punishment is self-inflicted; he paradoxically wrecks himself because of his sole focus on his need, as if he still had to survive. His environment fails him because he cannot attend to it. His self-centered hubris in life leads, in death, to an insatiable and failing self-care. Incapable of reaching the Otherworld that he is in but cannot be part of. A heavy fate fitting his name indeed!¹⁶
- We can now be more precise about the relation between desiring appetite and the external world: that relation is of primary importance for human flourishing. Unlike Sisyphus, Tantalus can't possibly be happy. Indeed, our ability to perceive and interact with the world isn't only a prerequisite to survival but also to human flourishing. At the same time, this virtuous ability also necessarily grounds the search for the truth the world refers to and partakes in. Or do you think that truth could be found, had we no concrete indication of its existence whatsoever?
- Probably not.
- For it seems impossible. Our search for truth in this life is bound to our perception of the sensible world. And could it be conducted if we didn't have any trustworthy standard by which to assess what's truly good or bad for us and others?
- Hardly.
- Finally, if you agree about the relation between perception, truth and happiness, don't you believe that exercising and strengthening our abilities to connect to our surroundings are correct ways to reach some level of true knowledge and flourishing?
- I do believe that too.
- And provided that one is thus cultivating flourishing, it's only logical that he'd apply and share his expertise with his human environment as well, since this, too, is an environment the wise care for.
- That is true. But wait... This is what you are doing right now, is it not?
- I do my best. But let's finish this discussion: it's barely raining anymore. It turns out that any kind of appetite, needing or desiring, is both necessary and natural. And the desire for good, varied, and particular food is evidence for an inquisitive relation to the world, which, if it's exercised mindfully and wisely, is conducive to attaining true knowledge and flourishing. The true gourmet is wise and happy. Let's leave it there.
- Brilliant, my friend.
- Now, Terpsion, I'll go and see whether I can prove myself right concerning beverages. After all, we're standing in front of Glykosialos' shop! Fancy a drink?
- You clearly also know how to foster friendship, Socrates.

Socrates was condemned shortly after, dear Euglossos, and I saw him one last time in his cell. I arrived just after his wife had been brought away. She was devastated. We all were. I do not want to recount all he said on that occasion, as you probably know most of it already. Yet, something in particular is worth remembering. As Socrates had been given the appointed measure of hemlock he had to drink, he looked at me and said, amused: 'Terpsion! A new taste in sufficient quantity indeed... As it happens, my environment makes me keen for unknown, particular tastes. One last occasion, then, to practice the love of truth through the desiring appetite, by tasting death itself! Farewell, Terpsion.' [This means, there is

¹⁵The use of mythology – often adapted and reinterpreted – is pervasive in Plato, where it serves both didactically as common ground and paradigmatically for exegesis (likewise with poetry, as in the *Protagoras* 338e ff.)

¹⁶Cf. Plato, *Cratylus* 395d–e, where he etymologizes the name of Tantalus.

no need to die.] Ever since, I have had to think about his words when eating or drinking. And I am sure you will remember them too from now on. He was truly and completely alive in that moment.”

That was the discussion between Terpsion and Socrates as it was reported to me by Terpsion himself. And he was right: since last week, there has not been a single meal during which I have not recalled what Socrates had told him.

Mithaikos

This is a very astute perspective on nutrition indeed! Clearly, I shall also remember it. I wish I too had had this conversation with Socrates.

Euglossos

Well, in a way, you have just had it, have you not?¹⁷

Mithaikos

You are right. However, you still have not told me why your meeting with Terpsion made you think of me.

Euglossos

You are being too modest. I thought of you simply because we all know that you are the best cook in the city. As such, you are a most seemly host and guide, for you afford us occasion to exercise our virtues.

Mithaikos

Thank you, Euglossos. Let me invite you tonight! Nurturing appetites is my pleasure and you have proven that yours is narrating instructive stories to satisfy others’ curiosity and helping them flourish. Besides, it will be getting dark soon enough.

Euglossos

You are too generous! Lead on. What are you cooking?

Mithaikos

Anything, as long as it satisfies my guests’ appetites.

* * *

¹⁷I am not aware of such an explicit narratological breach in Plato, whereby the fictional and historical Socrates would be explicitly conflated (or the latter simply subsumed to the former). But the first line of the *Cratylus* could perhaps be interpreted in such a way.

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