

PLATO'S NEW DIALOGUE

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Mount Olympus, the highest elevation in Greece (9,570 feet), is located 180 miles north of Athens, straddling the boundary of Macedonia and Thessaly. It has the form of a long, rocky ridge composed of windswept plateaus punctuated by rugged peaks which are snow covered for half the year. Only the final phase of the climb is difficult, but even seasoned alpinists are wary of the mountain's sudden, dangerous weather phenomena and sheer cliffs. Its furious thunderstorms undoubtedly lent support to the myth that the remote upper regions of Olympus were the protected reserve of the gods. By contrast, the congenial trails on the lower slopes are surrounded by lush Mediterranean flora, and the foothills descend gently to the delightful western shore of the Aegean Sea. Although the higher elevations clearly were visited in ancient times by religious pilgrims and others, the first recorded successful ascent did not occur until 1913, owing mainly to the area's long history of banditry.

– from *A Hiking and Climbing Guide to the Eastern Mediterranean*

Thank you and good morning on this long-awaited day.

Socrates is, of course, the folk hero of western philosophy. However, we know him only indirectly, through the writings of others, and are always hungry for new clues concerning his actual teachings and life.

Socrates' teachings are generally seen as marking a turning point, although each age has its own view of what turned and how. Cicero said that Socrates was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens, meaning that he shrugged off his predecessors' grand

theories about the physical universe and opted instead to talk ethics in the streets and homes of old Athens, always pressing his interlocutors for accurate definitions of the just man and the good life. Although Descartes is usually regarded as the originator of philosophy's "epistemological turn," it seems in a sense that Socrates got there first, with his vexing insistence that the underlying problem of knowledge must be faced: What do you know about human virtue, he demanded, and how, pray tell, do you know that you know? From Aristotle on, there has been a long tradition crediting Socrates with the discovery at the foundation of theory of knowledge – the discovery of the concept. In this vein, Kierkegaard described the great gadfly as the thinker who launched the ship of speculation onto the broad ocean of world history. Kierkegaard would hardly have been Kierkegaard if he had not added that it was Socrates, doubt monger and ironist *par excellence*, who pioneered the exploration of human subjectivity and thereby turned philosophy inward. And in the twentieth century, the eminent Hellenist Eric Havelock saw the "turn" through contemporary eyes, as a transition in the use of language. For him, Socrates was positioned on the cusp between, on the one hand, Homeric oralism with its heroics and vivid Olympian imagery, and, on the other hand, the deeply intellectual textualism of Plato and Aristotle.

Concerning Socrates' life, we are reasonably sure of only a few historical facts, and until now the first half of his life has been an almost blank page.

Socrates was born in Athens nearly 2500 years ago, in 470 or 469 BC, and was executed there by the authorities in the spring of 399, when he was seventy years old. In his youth, he is said to have been a student of the cosmologist Archelaus, who figures significantly in Plato's new dialogue. We have heretofore known little about Archelaus except that, like some other thinkers of that early period, he explained cosmic and human events in terms of such physical principles as matter and motion, and is also said to have proposed a rudimentary theory of evolution. His views certainly seem to have borne little resemblance to the philosophy of the mature Socrates, and G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven went so far as to call him "a second-rate thinker." Nonetheless, young Socrates was reportedly on fine

terms with Archelaus and remained under his tutelage for a number of years. Their contemporary, Ion of Chios, wrote that they once traveled together across the Aegean to the island of Samos. A. E. Taylor and other modern commentators have speculated that this trip might have occurred in 441 BC during Athens' naval siege there, when Socrates would have been twenty-eight or twenty-nine.

Whether he did military duty at Samos or not, we know from Plato that citizen Socrates later served capably at least three times during Athens' long, debilitating war with Sparta – in the campaigns at Potidaea (431-430 BC), Delium (424 BC), and Amphipolis (422 BC).

By his mid-forties, Socrates had doubtless become a well-known figure in Athens. In 423 BC – the year between the latter two military engagements – he was mercilessly lampooned in Aristophanes' popular comedy *The Clouds*, which depicted Socrates and his junior partner Chaerephon as a team of barefoot pseudointellectuals operating a ridiculous school called the Thinking Shop. (It is a further measure of his notoriety that Socrates was a character in another major play that year, the now-lost *Connus* by Ameipsias.) Most scholars doubt that Socrates ever really operated a formal school, although John Burnet wondered whether Aristophanes' satire might be best explained by postulating that Socrates served at least for a while as successor to his old master, Archelaus, as head of the school for scientific studies which Archelaus had presumably established somewhere in Athens.

Before turning to the exciting discovery now before us, let me say just a little more concerning Socrates' loyal friend Chaerephon, whom I mentioned a moment ago and after whom Plato's new dialogue is named. Note the pronunciation – KAYR-eh-fon.

There is good evidence that Chaerephon and Socrates were close associates of long standing. In his *Memorabilia*, Xenophon included Chaerephon on his short list of the true companions of Socrates. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates calls Chaerephon his impetuous friend from early days and recounts the well-known story of how Chaerephon had journeyed to Delphi to elicit the oracular pronouncement that no one in the land was wiser than Socrates. The ease of their relationship, as well as Chaerephon's irrepressible

nature, are also suggested in Plato's *Charmides*, which opens with Socrates returning from the siege of Potidaea to the effusive greeting of Chaerephon who, jests Socrates, behaves "like a wild man." Their familiarity is further evidenced at the start of the *Gorgias*, when the two friends arrive late for a gathering at the house of Callicles and Socrates sportively blames their tardiness on Chaerephon's predilection for socializing in the marketplace. With a little coaching from Socrates, Chaerephon then carries the argument during the early going in the *Gorgias* and acquits himself satisfactorily.

Kenneth Dover observed that "comic caricature must be a caricature of something" and, to the extent that we can reverse engineer historical facts from the amusing depictions of Chaerephon in the rowdy parodies of Aristophanes, it appears that he must have been a thin, rather unhealthy looking fellow who was nonetheless a vigorous conversationalist and widely recognized character in and around Athens. In the *Clouds* he is foremost among Socrates' pale, malnourished disciples and is described, in most ungentle terms, as "a living corpse." In the *Wasps* Chaerephon has a walk-on role as an impartial witness. And in the *Birds* we learn that he was nicknamed "the bat," which commentators variously see as denoting a bony appearance, nocturnal habits, or (and scholars differ on these nuances of coloration) an ashen or dusky or sallow complexion. However, I myself wonder whether the nickname might also allude to the same excitable, sudden disposition which Plato would later attribute to him (especially when I read, in the *Birds*, that Chaerephon arrives on the scene like a bat from Hades).

They must have made an odd couple as they strode through the streets of Athens – Chaerephon, angular, animated, and ever the enthusiast, alongside the perennially calm, pop-eyed, pug-nosed, thick-lipped Socrates who, according to Alcibiades, walked like a pelican.

Our copy of Plato's *Chaerephon* was discovered under our noses. It is a palimpsest manuscript, a set of early medieval parchments which were scraped clean of Plato's work and then overwritten with a tedious church document. The technical demands of restoration have been considerable, but much has now begun to emerge.

The *Chaerephon* depicts a conversation which takes place one evening in 407 or 406 BC when Chaerephon is apparently in his early sixties, like Socrates. The setting is a gathering of the most intimate members of the Socratic circle in the house of Socrates' well-to-do lifelong friend, Crito, who, in a few more years, would dutifully close the old gadfly's eyes after he succumbed to the executioner's lethal potion of hemlock.

The underlying topic is the all-important concept of *logos*, a term which I have usually translated as "speech," or "power of speech," or "reasoned speech," and, occasionally, as "argumentation" or "discourse." *Logos* is the fundamental resource of every storyteller, statesman, and philosopher. Ironically, on this particular evening Socrates has laryngitis and is all but speechless. The dialogue begins:

PHAEDONDES: Crito's watchdog and I have become old friends. He has just stretched out at my feet and is making sounds which I recognize as a request for some attention. It seems that the woofings and grumbings of dogs and the mewings and yippings of cats can be made with purpose. Tell us, Socrates, do you suppose that these animals possess some measure of the power of speech?

SOCRATES: By the dog, Phaedondes, an intriguing question! Alas, yesterday's conversations in the cold air have stolen my own voice and tonight I too shall rest like this hound before the fire, nursing my throat with Crito's wine. However, Chaerephon knows any number of edifying tales, and I am sure some of them concern our animal companions. It will probably take little effort to persuade him to tell us one.

CHAEREPHON: Your question about animals and speech is already answered, Phaedondes, for Socrates croaks exactly like a frog, yet I understand him perfectly.

SIMMIAS: Seriously, it seems that Phaedondes inquires into the difference between animal nature and human nature.

ADEIMANTUS: I believe, Chaerephon, that your old teacher, Archelaus, thought that animals and human beings have a common origin, that they both grew out of a primordial mixture of the elements.

CHAEREPHON: Yes, he said as much. Socrates and I were both longtime students of Archelaus, as was this little brother of mine, Chaerecrates.

CHAERECRATES: Quite so. Chaerephon sometimes tutored me, Socrates sometimes tutored him, and Archelaus oversaw us all.

CHAEREPHON: Which brings me to a most suitable tale. In fact, this story has been waiting for an occasion like this, when Socrates' closest friends and truest new associates – like young Phaedo and Plato here – are all gathered in a private place. Socrates, your expression suggests that you suspect what is coming. Yes, I am going to entrust this group with the true story of how we once met Odysseus and his dog Argos and then climbed Mount Olympus together.

SOCRATES: Excellent!

CHAEREPHON: Some thirty-five years ago – when we were strapping, coltish chaps – Socrates, Chaerecrates, and I journeyed home from Samos, in company with the learned Archelaus.

Our ship took a circuitous route. We went north to Lampsacus and renewed our acquaintance with Archelaus' former teacher, old Anaxagoras, who had been denounced as an atheist and expelled from Athens a few years earlier due to his revolutionary ideas about earth and heaven. He gave us his new book, which concerned mind, matter, and all manner of natural wonders, and we pored over it as we sailed on. The ship continued west into the Thermaic Gulf, where we debarked at Pydna to enjoy a week on dry land while the vessel visited nearby ports before returning for us.

On that day, as we stood at a vantage point on the outskirts of Pydna admiring the broad profile of Mount Olympus some twenty miles in the distance, another traveler and his dog came along.

The man was perhaps forty and not tall, but his arms and legs and neck were muscled like the roots of a tree. A large, dusty pack and a much-used bow were slung on his back. He greeted us amiably and stopped to share the view. At that moment, our servants arrived with food and, without hesitation, Archelaus hospitably invited the stranger to partake of our meal. After we had eaten, he thanked us, gestured at the mountain and cheerfully said that he was going there, then asked if we were heading the same way. When we answered that we had not thought of it, he exclaimed with a grin, 'I am Odysseus of Ithaca, soldier, rover, and singer, descended of the matchless hero who was strong in arms and in counsel, who shrewdly breached the walls of Ilium, who foiled men and monsters, and who traversed the wide face of the world to regain his home. I have business with the gods and would welcome your company on the way.'

There he stood, stalwart and superstitious, a man who seemed outside of time. The prospect of an excursion with him appealed to me instantly and the others soon agreed, so we all set off for Olympus.

That evening we found modest lodging in the town of Dium, in the foothills. Odysseus sang for his supper, and for ours as well, enthraling the locals with a recitation of the exploits of Achilles. He was the finest Homerist I have ever heard. His voice was musical beyond description, noble and sure, deep and rhythmic, infused with the power to overcome every listener. While Odysseus performed, his dog Argos sat close-by, watching his face intently, and it almost seemed to me as if the animal was silently weeping.

Later our group sat outdoors under the stars and we fell again to discussing Anaxagoras' book. I recall that Socrates asked searching questions about the relation of matter to mind. Odysseus listened in a bit, but seemed to have no ear for this sort of argumentation, and paid more attention to his dog than to us. Suddenly a dazzling bolt of light streaked across the night sky, illuminating the earth. Sizzling and popping sounds filled the air while sparkling pieces detached themselves from the main bolt, and arced downward. In the darkness we heard what sounded

like a couple of distant impacts and then something crashed through the roof of the house next to us. Archelaus rushed to investigate, with the rest of us at his heels. There was a hole in the ceiling and an odd odor filled the room. Bits of rock were scattered around and half-embedded in the floor was a smoldering stone the size of a fist. Archelaus picked it up and we passed it among us, turning it in our hands. The curious object was pitted, scorched, and still warm to touch. Townspeople now circulated in varied states of fright and agitation, and a local priest muttered something about an ill omen, casting suspicious sidelong glances at us. Archelaus smiled as he studied the object. 'Here is evidence,' he said, 'that Anaxagoras is correct. In reality, the celestial bodies are simply huge, hot stones, and small pieces of them can fall to earth.' Odysseus meanwhile stepped back outside. He surveyed the constellations, then spread his arms to the silhouette of the great mountain and declared with satisfaction, 'Argos, we are expected.'

We started early the next morning, following paths that twisted uphill through tangled ravines and over verdant, forested slopes. The mountain was alive with unusual vegetation and scampering wildlife, all of which delighted Archelaus. By late afternoon we had achieved a respectable elevation and the trees were thinning a bit. We found a good campsite beside a clear pool. Scooped into a rocky wall was a shallow, natural grotto which could provide shelter should the weather turn foul.

We had been there a short time when suddenly, with blinding swiftness, Odysseus strung his bow and sent an arrow flashing amid the trees. Argos raced after it and returned dragging the carcass of a wild goat. It was an astounding shot. Then Odysseus wheeled toward a thicket of bushes and called, 'Welcome, strangers! Come share our fire and feast.' To our surprise, two rustic fellows slowly showed themselves. 'Step out now,' continued Odysseus, 'for Zeus smiles on strangers and vagabonds. Come along, questions can wait. Let us meet and eat and drink like upright men.' Speaking thus, he coaxed them forward.

HERMOGENES: Surely they were bandits.

CHAEREPHON: But outmatched and hungry. They murmured to one another in a rude dialect and were wary at first, but, as we ate, Socrates chatted with them genially and Odysseus soon had them sitting before the fire cross-legged like children while he enchanted them with fine, old tales of their Macedonian kings and heroes. The larger of them called himself Karn and his companion was Tem.

As night fell, Odysseus conjured yet another trick. Outside the entrance to the shallow cave he stacked flat rocks to make a waist-high partition. He quickly stuffed the chinks with thick mud, but in the center of the partition he left a big hole. Then he built up a brilliant fire on the side of the partition furthest from the cave. He positioned himself at the entrance to the cave, facing inward, and we sat on either side of him. Firelight flooded through the hole behind him and lit the interior of the cave with a bright, even illumination. Then he cleverly contorted his hands in the path of the light to project illustrative shadow-shapes on the smooth cave walls as he related the tale of how the original Odysseus had escaped from the terrible lair of the one-eyed monster, Polyphemus. Our countrified guests were quite overwhelmed as they watched the huge Cyclops devour Odysseus' crewmen, then saw the sharpened log twisted deep into the monster's eye. And they quaked with delight when the blinded creature hurled a whole hilltop at the fleeing ship while Odysseus recklessly shouted taunts at him.

The next day Karn and Tem gladly joined us. They knew the mountain well, except for the sacred topmost region. As we progressed upward, the greenery subsided and all the trees were now pines. Chaerecrates asked Archelaus why the air grew cooler though we were nearer to the sun. Archelaus explained that the air lay close upon the earth and became thinner, and hence less retentive of heat, as we approached the ethereal region beneath the dome of heaven.

Karn told us that the expansive peak above was the Throne of Zeus, where the great god sometimes sat, invisible to mortals, and oversaw the world. Only on the rarest occasions, when diaphanous clouds swirled around the sunlit summit, could people

in the lowlands look up and catch fleeting glimpses of the gods in their glinting chariots. 'Yes,' said Odysseus, 'They move among us unseen and appear when they choose. At Ilium, Athena gave the bold warrior Diomedes the vision to see them in the thick of battle. Aphrodite was there, along with the war god Ares in full armor, and Diomedes wounded them both, which no other man has ever done. Pure ichor they bled, not red mortal blood.' Tem was wide-eyed. 'Men were stronger then,' observed Odysseus.

As we proceeded, Socrates pressed Odysseus with many questions. He asked what sorts of bodies the gods possess, whether their immortality and ability to change shape resides in the matter of which they are composed or in special powers of mind, and if their speech is like ours. He inquired too about their various means of transporting themselves through air and ether, and whether they ever soared so high as to touch the dome of heaven itself. Odysseus met this onslaught with equanimity, answering as honestly as any man can, sometimes with snatches of song and sometimes by telling stories.

The dome of heaven, he told us, is formed by the cupped hands of Ouranos which were severed from his immense body eons ago and are still alive. The one hand is inverted over the other to create a vast, hollow enclosure, in the middle of which the flat earth is suspended – surrounded above, below, and on all sides by an ocean of clear ether. These great cupped hands cradle the earth in its blanket of ether, and over the course of a day they rotate leisurely around it. At night we mortals can lift our eyes and see the splendid formations of stars which sparkle on the dark skin of Ouranos' palms and fingers. The sun, moon, and wandering planets float inside the hands and are shepherded through the ether by their respective gods, while a holy retinue of invisible divine attendants holds each of them in its orbit. These celestial objects travel high above the earth and, after they set each day, pass far beneath it to rise again the next day. On occasion, the gods may drive their chariots beyond the ambit of the planets, upward to the region of the stars. There the huge, scintillating hands of heaven flex with a slow rhythm, intermittently creating slim openings between the colossal fingers, through

which the gods can sometimes peer briefly into the realm outside the dome of heaven, the realm of sights beyond seeing. Among themselves the gods may speak of what they see, but mortal speech cannot aspire so high.

As Socrates and Odysseus moved out of earshot, my brother quietly said to Archelaus, 'Master, this singer affects me. What am I to think? Do gods perform such works?' Archelaus was circumspect. 'Even if ancient, divine creatures dwell on this old mountain,' he replied, 'I doubt that they rule the cosmos. The things above and below the earth still seem to me like wheels and levers in a great mill, all operating by natural, mechanical forces.'

In the afternoon, shortly after we had risen above the timberline, the wind gained strength and began to howl fearfully. Black, rumbling clouds crowded down on us and we were suddenly swept with waves of rain and beaten almost senseless by hail. Blinding, deafening thunderbolts blasted all around, so near that our hair stood up and we could taste the sour, burned air. With much slipping, sliding, and shrieking, we tried to wedge ourselves into crevices or between rocks. Archelaus lost his footing and was dashed down against the rim of a precipice. Had not Tem and Socrates quickly grasped his ankles, the storm would have dispatched him to a grim end far below.

The fury ceased as abruptly as it had begun. We found ourselves drenched and bruised. My ears rang dizzily, but trusty Argos steadied me as I struggled to my feet. Archelaus' leg was twisted and his arm broken, so we gingerly transported him down into the trees, where we built a fire and took shelter. The sky was again blue and the air calm, but our battered servants were still whimpering, and Chaerecrates and Tem had clearly had enough. With his usual self-possessed manner, Archelaus instructed us as we bound splints to his arm and packed his swollen ankle with icy snow which still lingered in a cranny nearby. He could climb no further, but judged that in a day his ankle would recover sufficiently to permit him to limp down the mountain with us.

Hearing this, I resolved to use the interim to proceed upward with Odysseus, leaving Archelaus in the secure care of the others. Socrates said that he would come along for company. Karn hesitated for only a moment, then said that he too would join us. 'Near the top,' he declared, 'is the Plateau of the Muses, where mortals may not walk. I will see it, then return.'

The four of us used what remained of the daylight to regain the elevation we had lost, plus a little more. We were all strong and intent. Odysseus climbed like an Ithacan goat and Socrates was a marvel in bare feet. In the morning, Argos led the final ascent, surefootedly scrambling ahead, then impatiently padding the ground with his paws while we caught up.

'Friend, what awaits you up there?' Socrates inquired.

'Judgment,' replied Odysseus. 'I have a cause to argue before the highest court. Long ago, anger surged through Poseidon's broad chest because mortals sang gladly about the blinding of his monstrous son and rejoiced to tell how my ancestor, the wily perpetrator, escaped every punishment. In an outburst, the god fixed his rage on Homer and cast him into the form of the dog you see before you. This loyal beast is in reality the greatest of all poets, now walking on four legs and robbed of his consummate power of speech.'

We all turned our eyes to Argos, who stared knowingly back at us, slowly wagging his tail.

'Pallas Athena sometimes approaches me in mists and dreams, by means of voices and visions,' continued Odysseus. 'She bade me here to appeal with reasoned speech for Homer's release, that his spirit may finally proceed to its proper station deep beneath the inconstant world of men.'

We came over a final rise and saw, spread before us, a rocky plain ringed by peaks. It was the Plateau of the Muses – mottled with lichen, still streaked with snow in its shadowy corners, and in the sunny, open areas dotted with the colors of tiny wildflowers. Karn stopped in his tracks and drew a deep breath.

We had contemplated the sight for only a few moments when wisps of cloud began to roll around the sides of the peaks and waft across the plateau. The haze turned in slow eddies and thickened, soon obscuring the plain with a chest-high covering of flowing vapor. Odysseus ran forward about a hundred paces with Argos yelping at his side. As the mist began to wrap around him, he turned, raised both arms, and called his farewell. I could not contain myself. Karn would not take another step, but I bounded after Odysseus, with Socrates in close pursuit.

The vapor was like a lake of roiling cloud. I plunged in, flailing toward the receding outline of Odysseus. My head protruded intermittently above the churning mists, but Odysseus and Socrates were now both completely immersed, the one somewhere ahead of me, the other somewhere behind. Neither answered my calls. My mind whirled and my sense of place and time was altered. I thought I heard faraway music; I seemed to see glorious but indistinct sights; and I recalled wonderful, half-forgotten perfections from a remote past, but I cannot say what they were.

Then, a brisk wind swept across the plateau and the cloud dispersed. I was surprised to find myself well into the middle of the plain. There was no sign of Odysseus. Karn waved to me from the distant periphery and Socrates stood as motionless as a statue near the point where we had entered the cloud bank.

I ran to Socrates, who remained transfixed, staring blankly into the open air. I shouted and shook him, trying to rouse him from his trance, but without success. So I called again for Odysseus and Argos and raced frantically about the plateau, but my search was fruitless. When I finally turned back, breathless and disheartened, I was relieved to see Socrates approaching me, now fully revived. 'Things are as they should be up here,' he said. 'Our rightful business lies below.'

We collected Karn and began our descent. Shortly before we reached the camp where Archelaus and the others were waiting, I asked Socrates what had occurred when he seemed spellbound on the high plateau. He replied that, just as he had entered the

mist, the voice of his long-lost *daimon*, which had been his invisible companion and inner guide in early childhood, had unexpectedly returned. It enjoined him to stop, to leave Odysseus and Argos to their appointed purpose, to abandon the airy, solitary heights of Olympus and go home to Athens which hums with human discourse.

Karn and Tem helped us assist Archelaus down to Dium. There, we exchanged simple gifts and amicably parted ways. Archelaus recovered, of course, and in a few years joined Anaxagoras in Lampsacus, where their scientific investigations were better tolerated than in Athens. As for myself and Socrates, to this day I feel that we came down from the mountain as more complete men.

More than two decades later, I was conversing with a pair of well-traveled gentlemen when one mentioned that a few years previously, in remote Persia, he had encountered a compelling singer who said he was the namesake and descendant of Odysseus, and who indeed seemed the living likeness of the great hero. As he described him, the second gentleman's face lit with recognition and he reported having recently seen the very same fellow in Egypt.

'Sirs,' I pressed, 'did he have a dog?'

No, they both replied with some puzzlement. There was no dog.

PHAEDONDES: Socrates, Chaerephon's story has struck us dumb. Have you regained your own power of speech yet? I must hear what you have to say about this tale.

SOCRATES: O, best of men

Here, the *Chaerephon* breaks off. Hopefully, by this time next year the difficult reconstruction of the remaining pages will be finished, and I shall be able to read Socrates' response to you. For now, however, it is as unknown as the ultimate fate of Homer.