

Nietzsche's "The Problem Of Socrates" (Consistent With The Epicurean Criticism of Socrates?)

Post by "Cassius" of March 15, 2026 at 7:34 AM

I just came across this biting criticism of Socrates and his embrace of dialectic from Nietzsche's "Twilight of The Idols." I'd say a significant number of these arguments are consistent with the Epicureans' criticisms of Socrates. Posting it here for reference and future discussion. [Source](#).

THE PROBLEM OF SOCRATES

Concerning life, the wisest men of all ages have judged alike: it is no good. Always and everywhere one has heard the same sound from their mouths--a sound full of doubt, full of melancholy, full of weariness of life, full of resistance to life. Even Socrates said, as he died: "To live--that means to be sick a long time: I owe Asclepius the Savior a rooster." Even Socrates was tired of it. What does that evidence? What does it evince? Formerly one would have said (--oh, **1** it has been said, and loud enough, and especially by our pessimists): "At least something of all this must be true! The consensus of the sages evidences the truth." Shall we still talk like that today? May we? "At least something must be sick here," we retort. These wisest men of all ages--they should first be scrutinized closely. Were they all perhaps shaky on their legs? late? tottery? decadents? Could it be that wisdom appears on earth as a raven, inspired by a little whiff of carrion?

This irreverent thought that the great sages are types of decline first occurred to me precisely in a case where it is most strongly opposed by both scholarly and unscholarly prejudice: I recognized Socrates and Plato to be symptoms of degeneration, tools of the Greek dissolution, pseudo-Greek, anti-Greek (Birth of Tragedy, 1872). The consensus of the sages--I comprehended this ever more clearly--proves least of all that they were right in what they agreed on: it shows rather that they themselves, these wisest men, agreed in some physiological respect, and hence adopted the same negative attitude to life--had to adopt it. Judgments, judgments of value, concerning life, for it or against it, can, in the

2 end, never be true: they have value only as symptoms, they are worthy of consideration only as symptoms; in themselves such judgments are stupidities. One must by all means stretch out one's fingers and make the attempt to grasp this amazing finesse, that the value of life cannot be estimated. Not by the living, for they are an interested party, even a bone of contention, and not judges; not by the dead, for a different reason. For a philosopher to see a problem in the value of life is thus an objection to him, a question mark concerning his wisdom, an un-wisdom. Indeed? All these great wise men--they were not only decadents but not wise at all? But I return to the problem of Socrates.

In origin, Socrates belonged to the lowest class: Socrates was plebs. We know, we can still see for ourselves, how ugly he was. But ugliness, in itself an objection, is among the Greeks almost a refutation. Was Socrates a Greek at all? Ugliness is often enough the expression of a development that has been crossed, thwarted by crossing. Or it appears as declining development. The anthropologists among the criminologists tell us that the typical criminal is

3 ugly: monstrum in fronte, monstrum in animo. But the criminal is a decadent. Was Socrates a typical criminal? At least that would not be contradicted by the famous judgment of the physiognomist which sounded so offensive to the friends of Socrates. A foreigner who knew about faces once passed through Athens and told Socrates to his face that he was a monstrum--that he harbored in himself all the bad vices and appetites. And Socrates merely answered: "You know me, sir!"

Socrates' decadence is suggested not only by the admitted wantonness and anarchy of his instincts, but also by the hypertrophy of the logical faculty and that sarcasm of the rachitic which distinguishes him. Nor should we forget those auditory hallucinations which, as "the daimonion of Socrates," have been

4 interpreted religiously. Everything in him is exaggerated, buffo, a caricature; everything is at the same time concealed, ulterior, subterranean. I seek to comprehend what idiosyncrasy begot that Socratic equation of reason, virtue, and happiness: that most bizarre of all equations which, moreover, is opposed to all the instincts of the earlier Greeks.

With Socrates, Greek taste changes in favor of dialectics. What really happened there? Above all, a noble taste is thus vanquished; with dialectics the plebs come to the top. Before Socrates, dialectic manners were repudiated in good society: they were considered bad manners, they were compromising. The young were warned against them. Furthermore, all such presentations of one's

5 reasons were distrusted. Honest things, like honest men, do not carry their reasons in their hands like that. It is indecent to show all five fingers. What must first be proved is worth little. Wherever authority still forms part of good bearing, where one does not give reasons but commands, the dialectician is a kind of buffoon: one laughs at him, one does not take him seriously. Socrates was the buffoon who got himself taken seriously: what really happened there?

One chooses dialectic only when one has no other means. One knows that one arouses mistrust with it, that it is not very persuasive. Nothing is easier to erase than a dialectical effect: the experience of every meeting at which there

6 are speeches proves this. It can only be self-defense for those who no longer have other weapons. One must have to enforce one's right: until one reaches that point, one makes no use of it. The Jews were dialecticians for that reason; Reynard the Fox was one--and Socrates too?

Is the irony of Socrates an expression of revolt? Of plebeian resentment? Does he, as one oppressed, enjoy his own ferocity in the knife-thrusts of his syllogisms? Does he avenge himself on the noble people whom he fascinates?

7 As a dialectician, one holds a merciless tool in one's hand; one can become a tyrant by means of it; one compromises those one conquers. The dialectician leaves it to his opponent to prove that he is no idiot: he makes one furious and helpless at the same time. The dialectician renders the intellect of his opponent powerless. Indeed? Is dialectic only a form of revenge in Socrates?

I have given to understand how it was that Socrates could repel: it is therefore all the more necessary to explain his fascination. That he discovered a new kind of agon, that he became its first fencing master for the noble circles of

8 Athens, is one point. He fascinated by appealing to the agonistic impulse of the Greeks--he introduced a variation into the wrestling match between young men and youths. Socrates was also a great erotic.

But Socrates guessed even more. He saw through his noble Athenians; he comprehended that his own case, his idiosyncrasy, was no longer exceptional. The same kind of degeneration was quietly developing everywhere: old Athens was coming to an end. And Socrates understood that all the world needed him-- his means, his cure, his personal artifice of self-preservation. Everywhere the instincts were in anarchy everywhere one was within five paces of excess: monstrum in animo was the general danger. "The impulses want to play the tyrant; one must invent a counter-tyrant who is stronger. When the

- 9** physiognomist had revealed to Socrates who he was--a cave of bad appetites-- the great master of irony let slip another word which is the key to his character. "This is true," he said, "but I mastered them all." How did Socrates become master over himself? His case was, at bottom, merely the extreme case, only the most striking instance of what was then beginning to be a universal distress: no one was any longer master over himself, the instincts turned against each other. He fascinated, being this extreme case; his awe-inspiring ugliness proclaimed him as such to all who could see: he fascinated, of course, even more as an answer, a solution, an apparent cure of this case.

- When one finds it necessary to turn reason into a tyrant, as Socrates did, the danger cannot be slight that something else will play the tyrant. Rationality was then hit upon as the savior; neither Socrates nor his "patients" had any choice about being rational: it was de rigueur, it was their last resort. The fanaticism with which all Greek reflection throws itself upon rationality betrays a desperate situation; there was danger, there was but one choice: either to
- 10** perish or--to be absurdly rational. The moralism of the Greek philosophers from Plato on is pathologically conditioned; so is their esteem of dialectics. Reason-virtue-happiness, that means merely that one must imitate Socrates and counter the dark appetites with a permanent daylight--the daylight of reason. One must be clever, clear, bright at any price: any concession to the instincts, to the unconscious, leads downward.

I have given to understand how it was that Socrates fascinated: he seemed to be a physician, a savior. Is it necessary to go on to demonstrate the error in his faith in "rationality at any price"? It is a self-deception on the part of philosophers and moralists if they believe that they are extricating themselves from decadence when they merely wage war against it. Extrication lies beyond their strength: what they choose as a means, as salvation, is itself but another expression of decadence; they change its expression, but they do not get rid of decadence itself. Socrates was a misunderstanding; the whole improvement-morality, including the Christian, was a misunderstanding. The most blinding daylight; rationality at any price; life, bright, cold, cautious, conscious, without instinct, in opposition to the instincts--all this too was a mere disease, another disease, and by no means a return to "virtue," to "health," to happiness. To have to fight the instincts--that is the formula of decadence: as long as life is ascending, happiness equals instinct.

11

Did he himself still comprehend this, this most brilliant of all self-outwitters? Was this what he said to himself in the end, in the wisdom of his courage to die? Socrates wanted to die: not Athens, but he himself chose the hemlock; he forced Athens to sentence him. "Socrates is no physician," he said softly to himself, "here death alone is the physician. Socrates himself has merely been sick a long time."

12