

## Montaigne's 'Riveting' of the Soul to the Body

Socrates' amazing lack of concern for his body on the day of his death is the metaphysical statement par excellence of the Socratic understanding of the nature of man. Man is body and soul, but insofar as the soul is corrupted by the 'materialness' of the body, it loses the ability to perform its true function: communicate with the divine. Put differently, philosophy is a divine activity and as such must prepare the lover of wisdom for dying and death. But death is the separation of the body from the soul; therefore Philosophy is that art by which, to the degree to which it is possible, man separates himself from his body, or *organon*. While Ancient philosophers held this doctrine to varying degrees (for example Aristotle arguably placed more emphasis than Plato on the soul's need for the body, even in the act of intellection), they all agreed with the basic tenet that 'carnality', by which I mean 'the full and active participation of the soul in the activities of the body', is the antithesis of philosophy, that the body is to the soul (insofar as the soul is *nous*) as the human is to the divine. Socrates, for example, taught on his deathbed that "every pleasure and pain provides, as it were, another nail to *rivet* the soul to the body and to weld them together. It makes the soul corporeal, so that it believes that truth is what the body says it is."(Plato, *Phaedo*, 83d; emphasis added)

Montaigne, on the other hand, who describes his ways as 'new and unusual', seems to revere Plato's hero Socrates while simultaneously undermining the consolation of philosophy. In short, by questioning philosophy's most hallowed role, namely a propaedeutic for dying and death, Montaigne brings into question the possibility and even desirability of separating the body from the soul. In this talk we will examine Montaigne's new and unusual way of preparing for dying and death, which preparation

will turn out to be the ‘riveting’ of the soul to the body, as both a response to Socrates and as a foundation for a new philosophy. In order to question philosophy’s pretensions to be able to prepare us for dying and death, Montaigne, or so I hope to show, re-interprets the story of the death of Socrates. Before examining the way in which Montaigne re-interprets this story, it will be helpful to answer why the death of Socrates is a prime target.

### **1. The Unique Case of Socrates’ Death**

Socrates is a close ally of Montaigne in criticizing the claims of philosophers to have knowledge: “his [i.e. Socrates’] God considered the opinion that we possess learning and wisdom a singular piece of stupidity in man.”(368) Further, Socrates seems to have been the first to realize that philosophy ought first and foremost to teach us about man, and in this Montaigne is in complete agreement: “It is he [i.e. Socrates] who brought human wisdom back down from heaven, where she was wasting her time, and restored her to man, with whom lies her most proper and laborious and useful business.”(Montaigne 793) Yet Montaigne is very critical of the pretensions of philosophy, and thus Socrates is the first to undergo attack. While Socrates brought philosophy down from the heavens, he simultaneously pulled man up to the divine. Montaigne, in re-writing the death of Socrates, is able to criticize the philosopher *par excellence*. In doing this, however, we will argue that he is in some sense accepting an open invitation, for The *Phaedo* seems to have been written in such a way as to bring itself into question.

In examining *The Phaedo*, it will be helpful to take Ann Hartle's reading as our guide. In particular, her claim that "The *Phaedo* is another apology and is meant to be compared with the *Apology of Socrates*" (Hartle, Death and the Disinterested Spectator 11) will prove to be essential to the thesis that Montaigne re-interprets the death of Socrates in order to bring into question the separation of body and soul so crucial to philosophy. If it is true that *The Phaedo* is a second apology of philosophy, where by apology is understood not only a defense but also a manifestation of philosophy's power, then Montaigne's re-interpreting can be seen as an unmasking of the pretension that philosophy can prepare us for dying and death insofar as it is a divine activity. If Montaigne is re-writing Socrates' apology for philosophy by changing the story of how Socrates' faced dying and death, he is simultaneously bringing into question the possibility and even desirability of separating the body from the soul.

The story of Socrates' death is particularly inviting for someone who wishes to unmask philosophy's pretensions, not only because of its bold claim to 'prove' that philosophy prepares us for dying and death and thus makes us of good cheer in the face of death (for this is held in common with other famous death stories), but in its self-conscious invitation to doubt and re-interpretation.

In the first place, the story of Socrates' death is not given firsthand, for it is Phaedo who tells us what happened. Phaedo is recounting to Echecrates, who lives in Phlius, the death of Socrates: "What are the things he said before he died? And how did he die? . . . Hardly anyone from Phlius visits Athens nowadays, nor has any stranger come from Athens for some time who could give us a clear account of what happened . . . ." (57a) Phaedo, then, has the job of telling what Socrates said and how his hero Socrates

faced death. While giving Socrates' thoughts on the relationship between philosophy and dying and death, and holding Socrates to be the philosopher *par excellence*, it is no wonder that Phaedo would attempt to show the harmony of Socrates' words and deeds<sup>i</sup>. Even if Phaedo does not go so far as to tell a noble lie, like any other story-teller, he emphasizes and de-emphasizes certain elements in order to paint a picture of "the best, and also the wisest and the most upright [man he ever knew]." (118a) In *The Apology*, we are 'eyewitnesses' at Socrates' trial; here we are only able to hear a story of Socrates' death.

In the second place, Platonic dialogues, unlike most other philosophical writings, are not straightforward treatises. Even poetic philosophical works like Lucretius' On The Nature of The Universe differ in their lack of a dramatic element. As Hartle notes,

the actions of the characters must be taking into account [in a Platonic dialogue] . . . . Part of what it means to say that the Platonic dialogues are dramatic is that they allow us to see the passions, that the passions at work in a dialogue or deliberately excluded from it must also be taken into account in the interpretation of the dialogue. (Hartle, Death and the Disinterested Spectator 12-3)

Since Montaigne wants to critique the pretensions of the philosophers' ability to face dying and death in good cheer, a dramatic work such as a Platonic dialogue would be a good place to start. Further, the dramatic element in *The Phaedo*, or more accurately its lack of a dramatic element, invites us to doubt and re-interpret it. In particular, the 'inhuman' manner of Socrates' death is so incredible as to be unbelievable. Phaedo is

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<sup>i</sup> While Socrates' words and deeds are not, upon closer examination, consistent with one another, the appearance is what counts here; Phaedo is trying to make Socrates appear fearless in the face of death as a

presenting the way in which *the philosopher* dies, and unfortunately Socrates died as *a man*: “This [the absence or apparent absence of fear] is so surprising as to be incredible. We are forced to doubt the veracity of Phaedo’s account. . . . And the action that is imitated in the dialogue is not the death of Socrates but the rule of soul over body.”(17) In short, The *Phaedo* paints a picture of Socrates’ death that is so ‘divine’ as to be inhuman, and in doing so, brings into question the possibility of what it portrays: philosophers communicate with the divine, but they are not gods.

In the third place, Socrates’ lack of fear is owing to the fact that he holds the soul to be immortal, and yet his arguments on behalf of this doctrine are questionable at best (see Chapter 1 of Death and the Disinterested Spectator). The account of Socrates’ death, then, forces us to question Socrates’ “inhuman” lack of the fear of death. Recall that Echecrates question was two-fold: 1) What did Socrates say before he died?, 2) How did he die?. If One and Two do not coalesce into a consistent account of Socrates’ death, we have reason to believe that the account has been ‘nobly’ changed. Further, since Socrates’ position regarding the nature of philosophy and the relationship between the body and the soul are consistent with other discussions he has had, it is the question of how he died that is dubitable. Upon closer examination, then, Socrates actions are not consistent with his words, and thus how Socrates faced death is open to question.

Since Socrates’ actions are not consistent with his words, Montaigne can freely give another account of Socrates’ death. Notice that he can do this while still maintaining that Socrates is the greatest philosopher, the one whose death was more beautiful even than Cato’s (see p.310), for he is merely telling the ‘truth’ about Socrates’ death. By revealing the true actions of Socrates on the day of his death, Montaigne can

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result of Socrates’ being a philosopher, and in this he is successful.

simultaneously uncover the truth about philosophy's pretensions and 'save' Socrates' actions. In other words, where Phaedo attempted to save his hero by maintaining the consistency of his words with his deeds, Montaigne saves the hero by maintaining the consistency of his actions with the limitations of philosophy. Montaigne wants to show what the death of the philosopher is really like, and in doing this, he maintains a revised form of the adage 'friend of Plato but more a friend of the Truth': friend of The *Phaedo* but more a friend of the Truth.

## **2. The Death of Socrates, Re-Told**

If The *Phaedo*, the Platonic dialogue recounting the death of Socrates, goes out of its way to show a Socrates without fear in the face of death, and in such a way as to be dubitable at best, Montaigne goes out of his way to show a Socrates cheerful in the face of death, and in such a way as to be humanly possible at least. We noted the inhumanness of Socrates in Phaedo's account, and that Socrates' inability to prove the immortality of the soul forces us to question his actions; Montaigne, by re-telling how Socrates acted on the day of his death, reveals the humanness of Socrates and, at the same time, uncovers the possibility that Socrates' inability to prove the immortality of the soul is a way of questioning the pretensions of philosophy to prepare us for dying and death insofar as it is a divine activity. How does Montaigne re-tell the story? Clearly the inhumanness of Socrates on the day of his death is important for someone who would want to show that philosophy is not a divine activity, and thus bringing Socrates back to earth, just as Socrates did to philosophy, would be the first move of Montaigne.

The first thing said of Socrates by Phaedo is that they “found Socrates recently released from his chains.”(60a) After sending his wife away, Socrates disinterestedly rubs his leg and, as if speaking about somebody else’s pleasure and pain, remarks:

What a strange thing that which men call pleasure seems to be, and how astonishing the relations it has with what is thought to be its opposite, namely pain. A man cannot have both at the same time. Yet if he pursues and catches one, he is almost always bound to catch the other also, like two creatures with one head.(60b)

Socrates tacitly points to two things about what he takes philosophy to reveal to its practitioners: 1) Socrates can qua philosopher speak about the pleasure or pain he feels as if he is not feeling it, 2) pleasure and pain are not opposites, the passions are the opposite of freedom from passion; in other words, Socrates’ views the life of pursuing the passion of pleasure (which inevitably leads to the ‘catching’ of pain) as opposed to the life of pursuing the freedom from passion altogether. In turn, these two together point to the way in which philosophy prepares us for dying and death: by separating the soul from the body and thus from pleasure and pain.

Socrates speaks about his own pleasure and pain disinterestedly to the extent to which he is not his body. Philosophy teaches that a philosopher is coextensive with his soul, that the body is the prison of the soul, and therefore a philosopher does not allow himself to undergo pleasure or pain. The soul of the philosopher, in contradistinction from the soul of *hoi polloi*, knows that the causes of the passions are not true (see 83c), and thus philosophy allows those who practice it to face death without passion. If

Socrates felt pleasure or pain in approaching death, he would be ipso facto admitting the inability of philosophy to fulfill its promise.

Here a distinction must be made between the soul separating from the body and soul ruling the body. To rule the body is merely human, for it does not entail the separation that communication with the divine requires. In other words, Socrates is not claiming that philosophy only teaches us how to rule the passions that come from the body, but that it teaches that such passions are contrary to the philosophical life.

Philosophy first requires ruling the body, but only en route to the soul's separating itself from it. A philosopher could, qua soul, feel pleasure in the objects of thought because they truly *are*, but the sensible objects, namely those revealed by the body, cause pleasure or pain in such a way as to trick the soul into thinking that these objects are real. Further, the true pleasure in objects of thought, or the pleasure the philosopher has in communing with the divine, does not have an opposite: there is no corresponding pain. On the other hand, those who merely rule the body with the soul can experience pleasure and pain properly, which is to say without thinking that the visible objects are real; nonetheless such rule reveals that they are not separating the soul from the body.

While Socrates himself says in *The Phaedo* that a philosopher has reasons to be of good cheer and hopeful on the day of his death, this would be a kind of pleasure that follows upon reasoning about the objects of thought, and this is open only to philosophers. If Socrates felt pleasure or pain stemming from the body in facing death, by his own words, he would be facing it as a man, namely a soul and a body, and not as a philosopher, namely a soul communicating with the divine. While there is no sense of overcoming pain in the Socrates of *Phaedo*'s account, if Montaigne could show a

Socrates experiencing a pleasure that is a result of rule over the body, and not reasoning about the objects of thought, he could re-tell the death of Socrates in such a way as to have a Socrates facing death as a man.

When discussing the death of Socrates, Montaigne describes the event as follows:

And who that has a mind howsoever little tinctured with true philosophy can be satisfied with imagining Socrates as merely free from fear and passion in the incident of his imprisonment, his fetters, and his condemnation? *And who does not recognize in him not only firmness and constancy (that was his ordinary attitude), but also I know not what new contentment, and a blithe cheerfulness in his last words and actions?*

(Montaigne 309-10; emphasis added)

What this ‘true philosophy’ that Montaigne has in mind may be we will explore later, but suffice it to say that he is here suggesting that anyone even familiar with such philosophy would be dissatisfied with the Socrates of The *Phaedo*. Montaigne, in re-telling the way in which Socrates faced death, points, not to the doctrine of the separation of the soul from the body which *Phaedo* would have us believe allowed Socrates to face death without fear, but ‘firmness and constancy’. Yet this is Socrates ‘ordinary attitude’, and, insofar as one would call this the virtue of courage, is exactly what *Phaedo* excludes:

We are forced to doubt the veracity of *Phaedo*’s account. Fear of death is so thoroughly excluded from *Phaedo*’s report that his final description of Socrates as good, wise, and just, excludes the virtue of courage, *precisely the virtue that would ordinarily account for the manner of facing death*

*that Phaedo has just reported of Socrates.*(Hartle, Death and the Disinterested Spectator 15; emphasis added)

Montaigne's Socrates is able to face death insofar as his soul rules his body. Again, philosophers only rule their bodies en route to separating themselves from them as if escaping from a prison, but Montaigne does not allow for such escape. Ironically, the reason Socrates is still in prison is that he refused to escape from it<sup>ii</sup>; similarly, Montaigne has Socrates not freeing himself from the prison of his soul by a divine activity, but being free from vicious desires by the all-too human activity of habituation to virtue. This is not to say that Socrates does not look forward to what philosophy promises that its practitioners will attain after death, i.e. communication with the divine, but it makes the pretension of philosophy to prepare us for dying and death insofar as it is a divine activity untenable.

Montaigne does not need to deny that Socrates is "prepared to enter into the knowledge of things to come"(Montaigne 310) in order to maintain that philosophy does not prepare us for dying and death insofar as it is a divine activity. His only point is that it is not *qua* separated soul/philosopher that philosophy can prepare Socrates; instead it is *qua* man habituated to virtue that Socrates could face death. In other words, philosophy can 'stiffen' the soul in such a way as to prepare us for dying and death: "A *man* can, by habit and experience fortify himself against pain, shame, indigence, and such other accidents."(267; emphasis added) Socrates did not undergo pain, and was able to avoid shameful actions; on the contrary he felt the pleasure of the virtuous action of facing death courageously. He had not practiced for death before, which is what philosophy

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<sup>ii</sup> See *Crito*, where Socrates refuses the opportunity to escape from prison.

supposedly is; he merely prepared himself through philosophy. In short, Socrates was habituated through philosophy in such a way as to ‘fortify himself’, but to say this is tantamount to admitting that philosophy did not make him ‘of good cheer in the face of death’ insofar as it helped him to separate his soul from his body; philosophy helped Socrates to rule his body, but not rid himself of it. Philosophy, then, is not divine.

If philosophy is the practice for dying and death, then it would be divine, for only those communicating with the divine would be able to practice what can only be done once: “as for death, we can try it only once.”(p.267) In other words, death is the separation of the soul from the body, but philosophy, insofar as it is a divine activity, is the separation of the soul from the body; therefore philosophers can practice dying. Montaigne’s claim that Socrates faced death as a man, and that he found it pleasant insofar as he was prepared for it through habituation to virtue, amounts to a denial of philosophy’s ability to prepare us for death; further, implicitly philosophy is unable to deliver its promise because it is not a divine activity, and thus the ability and desirability of separating the soul from the body has been called into question.

### **3. A New Philosophy for Preparation for Death**

Montaigne, despite his heavy-handed critique of philosophy, still regards Socrates as one of the “very few full and pure examples of life”(852), and of his ‘picture’ “as a pattern and ideal of all sorts of perfection.”(*ibid.*) However, whether Montaigne wanted to wrestle Socrates’ from Plato’s hands<sup>iii</sup>, or merely show the limitations of philosophy as exemplified in the death of Socrates, he certainly intended to separate his ‘new and unusual’ philosophy from that of the Ancients. Where the Ancient philosophers feared the riveting of the soul to the body, Montaigne sought it out: “Plato fears our hard

bondage to pain and pleasure, since it obligates and attaches the soul too much to the body; I, on the contrary, because it detaches and unbinds it.”(39) If the body is essential to man’s nature, and the riveting of the soul to the body desirable, would it not seem that on top of losing its divine status, philosophy makes us unable to face death?

In *That to Philosophize*, the first words of which are “Cicero says that to philosophize is nothing else but to prepare for death.”(56), Montaigne unequivocally affirms that Socrates defined philosophy well on the day of his death: “The goal of our career is death.”(57) However, since he thinks that the separation of the body from the soul is the end of ‘our being’ (see p.386), he explains why philosophy is such a preparation in a new way:

This [namely that to philosophize is to prepare for death] is because study and contemplation draw our soul out of us to some extent and keep it busy outside the body; which is a sort of apprenticeship and semblance of death. *Or else it is because* all the wisdom and reasoning in the world boils down finally to this point: to teach us not to be afraid to die. In truth, either reason is a mockery, *or it must aim solely at our contentment, and the sum of its labors must tend to make us live well and at our ease, as Holy Scripture says.* All the opinions in the world agree on this – that pleasure is our goal – though they choose different means to it. (56; emphasis added)

Montaigne still understands philosophy to prepare us for death and dying, but not by separating our souls from our bodies, but by removing death’s sting. Whereas Socrates thought about the Forms, virtue, and the like, and thus prepared himself for death,

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<sup>iii</sup> See *Of Experience*, p.850, where Plato is distinguished from Socrates.

Montaigne prepares himself for death through experience with it: “Since my earliest days, there is nothing with which I have occupied my mind more than with images of death.”(60) Since, in *Of Experience*, Montaigne denies that humans are capable of, or should even be desirous of, getting beyond experience to art, science, or metaphysics, it would make sense that, just as Socrates thought that by performing the highest activity man is capable of he would prepare himself for death, Montaigne would prepare himself through the highest means he thought to be possible: experience. It is no wonder, then, that in his essay *On Practice*, in which he brings into question the practice of philosophy’s ability to prepare us for death and dying, he would relate a near-death *experience*, and not, like Socrates, a metaphysical tale that makes death easier. The story of Montaigne’s near-death experience seems to be an analogy for his repudiation of the presumption of philosophers, as well as a re-birth of philosophy as something ‘new and unusual’.

“During our third civil war, or the second (I do not quite remember which), I went riding one day about a league from my house, which is situated at the very hub of all the turmoil of the civil wars in France.”(268) Notice that Montaigne introduces this story by relating that the historical/political situation he was in is of no consequence, even to the point that he cannot remember which war happened to be raging – he is the epitome of the presumptuous philosopher. The philosopher, who busies himself only with the divine, has no care for, and takes no notice of, the events around him, those events being of little consequence to the eternal and unchanging pursuit of wisdom. While living in the ‘very hub’ of the battles, he nonetheless goes about his daily business, which, as a philosopher, is a leisurely jaunt in Nature: “*Thinking myself perfectly safe*, and so near

my home that I needed no better equipage, I took a very easy but not very strong horse.”(269; emphasis added) Upon reading this, only a philosopher would not be struck by the idiocy or presumption (depending on how you look at it) of a man going for a leisurely trip on an ‘easy’ horse while living in the ‘very hub’ of a battle! The philosopher, not fearing or even concerning himself with death, cares not for the fact that he may lose his life, for he is too concerned with getting closer to Nature.

As he is on his leisurely jaunt, Montaigne is struck by one of his own men and, interestingly enough, is ‘killed’: “. . . and I ten or twelve paces beyond [his horse], *dead*, stretched on my back . . . . It is the only swoon that I have experienced to this day.”(269; emphasis added) The presumptuous philosopher, thinking that his body is of no concern, ends up ‘dead’, which is the result of separating the soul from the body. In this near-death experience, however, Montaigne comes to realize that man is soul and body, and that, when the body is destroyed, the soul is lost. Not after or before, but concurrent with the body, his soul comes back to life: “As for the functions of the soul, they were reviving with the same progress as those of the body.”(269) Montaigne learns from his near-death experience, then, that philosophy must bring the body and soul closer together, and that the presumption that would sunder the two would lead to the death of man. To philosophize is to prepare for death and dying only insofar as it rivets the soul to the body.

While the reasons for such ‘riveting’ go beyond the scope of this talk, for one would have to unpack Montaigne’s metaphysics, we could conclude by saying that Montaigne takes riveting the soul to the body to reveal a new understanding of man and

the divine. Montaigne observes that man is “nailed and riveted to the worst, dearest, and most stagnant part of the universe, on the lowest story of the house and the farthest from the vault of heaven”(330), and nonetheless Montaigne disdains any philosophy that calls ‘barbarous’ “marry[ing] the divine with the earthly, the reasonable with the unreasonable, the severe with the indulgent, the honorable with the dishonorable.”(855) If God can be wedded to man, then it is only because of our presumption that we try to separate ourselves from our bodies. For Montaigne, philosophy can prepare us for death, but only by coming down from the heavens.

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