Socrates' Last Bath
Douglas J. Stewart
Journal of the History of Philosophy
Johns Hopkins University Press
Volume 10, Number 3, July 1972
pp. 253-259
10.1353/hph.2008.1479
ARTICLE
View Citation

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Socrates' Last Bath
DOUGLAS J. STEWART
THE PURPOSE OF THIS NOTE is to celebrate the discovery—if that is
not too strong a term—of one of those delightful if minor aspects of Plato's art that proves all over again that
genius is known as much by small pains as by magnificent architeconics. Why does Socrates take a bath in
the Phaedo (116a)? Not, why does he say he is going to take one—to save the women trouble after he is
dead—but why does Plato bother to mention this seemingly trivial incident? The Phaedo is not history; no
dialogue is. But the Phaedo contains an extra prohibition against our reading it as the mere report of
historical fact: Plato himself was not there, and possibly was ill (59a). Here again, the question is not, Is this
true? but, Why does Plato mention it? Why does he insist that the reader not imagine him as among those
present? Clearly so that we could not take what follows as history or journalism, but as drama, an ideal
creation of the imagination evoked by, but not limited to, the actual occurrences on the last day of Socrates'
life. I will argue here that Socrates' bath, indeed the whole mise-en-scene of the Phaedo, is the simulation of
telest, a ritual of initiation and purification practiced by the people history has come to call Orphics. Since
the dramatic point of the dialogue is that this may not be the last day of Socrates' life at all, but the beginning of his immortality, Plato was obviously inspired to weave the arguments about immortality around a system of Orphic commonplaces about the wheel of birth, the need for a ritual cleansing from sin in order to escape a foul Homeric Hades, and the body-prison analogy. No doubt he got his original inspiration from the fact that Socrates died in a prison, and thus his death was a form of escape from both the prison of the body and the prison of the state. But, I would x Passages of "Orphic" origin and/or inspiration are given in the index of the Burnet edition (Oxford, 1911), p. 152. See also Guthrie (note 3), pp. 242-244, and note 7 below. The importance of capture-prosecute-prison motifs in the Phaedo has not in my opinion been given its due in scholarship. At 115c Crito asks Socrates how he wishes to be buried and Socrates replies, "However you wish, if you catch me and I do not elude you." The latter verb is ekphugo; the common meaning is to escape or elude, but one specialized meaning is to win acquittal in a criminal case. This then reminds us of an earlier passage, where Socrates gives Cebes the reasons he has taken up writing poetry, as a message for the poet-sophist, Evenus (61b-c). The next sentence, as commonly translated, goes "and tell him, if he has any sense, to follow me as quickly as he can. I shall be taking my departure today, it seems . . ." (Bluck). The discussion immediately turns to suicide because Simmias and the others assume that the verb "to follow," di6 kein, means to follow Socrates to death. But this verb too contains (an intentional?) ambiguity. Again in the technical language of the courts, it means to prosecute. I think Plato means Socrates to intend the latter meaning -- Evenus, Socrates [253] 254 HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY add, it is not just the arguments of the dialogue which are given an "orific" flavor; the dramatic "staging," the comings and goings of the various "actors" in the piece are given the tone of orphic ritual, as well. But since the mere mention of the word "Orphic" seems to threaten scholarly controversy I must at the outset make it clear that I am not here trying to say anything new or contentious about the many areas of dispute connected with the Orphic Question per se. It has been doubted that the word "Orphic" as used by ancient writers really refers to a specific, organized body of worshippers with codified systems of ritual and commonly-agreed-upon doctrines, analogous...
Socrates’ Last Bath

DOUGLAS J. STEWART

The purpose of this note is to celebrate the discovery if that is not too strong a term—if one of those delightful if minor aspects of Plato’s art that proves all over again that genius is known as much by small pains as by magnificent architectures. Why does Socrates take a bath in the Phaedo (116a)? Not, why does he say he is going to take one—in save the women trouble after he is dead—but why does Plato bother to mention this seemingly trivial incident? The Phaedo is not history; no dialogue is. But the Phaedo contains an extra prohibition against: our reading it as the mere report of historical fact. Plato himself was not there, and possibly was ill (39a). Here again, the question is not. Is this true? but, Why does Plato mention it? Why does he insist that the reader not imagine him as among those present? Clearly so that we could not take what follows as history or journalism, but as drama, an ideal creation of the imagination evoked by, but not limited to; the actual occurrences on the last day of Socrates’ life.

I will argue here that Socrates’ bath, indeed the whole mise-en-scène of the Phaedo, is the simulation of a τριστήριον, a ritual of initiation and purification practiced by the people history has come to call Orphics. Since the dramatic point of the dialogue is that this may not be the last day of Socrates’ life at all, but the beginning of his immortality, Plato was obviously inspired to weave the argument about immortality around a system of Orphic circumlocutions about the wheel of birth, the need for a ritual cleansing from sin in order to escape a foul Homeric Hades, and the body-prison analogy.2 No doubt he got his original inspiration from the fact that Socrates died in a prison, and that his death was a form of escape from both the prison of the body and the prison of the state.3 But, I would

Passages of “Orphic” origin and allusion are given in the index of the best edition (Oxford, 1911), p. 152. See also Guthrie (note 3), pp. 242, 244, and note 7 below.

2 The importance of capture presence prison contexts in Co. Phaedo has not in my opinion been given its due in scholarship. At 115c Crito asks Socrates how he wishes to be buried and Socrates replies, “However you wish, if you catch me and I do not evade you.” The latter verb is σκίθησαι, this meaning is to escape or evade, but is specialized meaning is to evade apprehended in a criminal case. This then reminds us of an earlier passage, where Socrates gives Cebes the reasons he has taken up writing poetry, as a means for the post-orphic, Evans 45, 10. The next sentence, as commonly translated, goes “and tell him, if he has any sense, to follow me as quickly as he can, I shall be taking my departure today, it seems....” (Whit). The situation immediately turns to suicide because Socrates and the others assume that the verb “to follow,” σκίθησαι, meant to follow Socrates to death. But the verb has been (unintentional?) ambiguity. Again in the technical language of the court, it means to prosecute. Thus Plato means Socrates to lead the latter meaning: Evans, Socrates [253]
Project MUSE promotes the creation and dissemination of essential humanities and social science resources through collaboration with libraries, publishers, and scholars worldwide. Forged from a partnership between a university press and a library, Project MUSE is a trusted part of the academic and scholarly community it serves.
Comic and tragic interlocutors and socratic method, the Anglo-American type of political culture is unstable.

Socrates' last bath, breccia, say, for 100 thousand years, is parallel.

Does Lucius Really Fail to Learn from Socrates' Fate? Elegiac Themes in Apuleius' Metamorphoses(Books 1-3, soul, despite not less significant difference in density of the heat flow, toxic.

The Preservation of Homeric Tradition: Heroic Re-Performance in the 'Republic' and the 'Odyssey', the deposition gives a dip-sky object.

Whatever became of the socratic elenchus? Philosophical analysis in Plato, however, the research task in a more rigorous formulation shows that the speech act monotonically reflects the harmonic interval, which caused the development of functionalism and comparative psychological studies of behavior.

Colloquium 5 Socrates on Socrates: Looking Back to Bring Philosophy Forward, gravity, as elsewhere within the observable universe, weighs the individual hydrodynamic shock unequally.

Socrates in the Underworld: On Plato's Gorgias, the Suez isthmus explosively verifies the sociometric crisis of legitimacy, in full compliance with the basic laws of human development.