

BROWN AND SMITH

A SOCRATIC DIALOGUE

By

STANLEY PARGELLIS



CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB • 1957

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SCENE.—THE PRISON OF SOCRATES

(*Enter CRITO.*)

SOCRATES: Why have you come at this hour, Crito? It must be quite early.

CRITO: Yes, certainly.

SOCRATES: What is the exact time?

CRITO: The dawn is breaking.

SOCRATES: I wonder that the keeper of the prison would let you in.

CRITO: He knows me, because I often come, Socrates. Moreover, he was impressed by the appearance of two strangers whom I dared to bring with me, and by the amount of their largesse. For these reasons he agreed with me that, if you are willing, they should be permitted entrance.

SOCRATES: Who are these strangers, and from whence do they come?

CRITO: They appear to come, Socrates, from another land and another time, from a land unknown to us, and

from a time far, far in the future. Their clothing, their bearing, suggest that they speak the truth.

SOCRATES: Let them enter.

(CRITO goes into the anteroom, and returns with two men dressed in the style of the mid-twentieth century.)

CRITO: Socrates, this man is Brown; and this is Smith.

BROWN: Pleased to meet you, Socrates.

SMITH: It is a privilege, Socrates.

SOCRATES: These are greetings strange to me. I infer that yours, Brown, is meant to give me pleasure, as when one man wishes for another that he may have a good day, or calls down the blessings of the gods upon him. But your greeting states directly that my pleasure derives wholly from the fact that you are pleased. Why should your pleasure be a concern of mine? And your greeting, Smith, seems equally open to question. By it you imply that you have been selected from your fellows for an unusual and permanent honor, that you derive satisfaction from this promotion, and that, because you are thus satisfied, I should be also. May I ask you to tell me your meaning of the nature of pleasure?

CRITO: Forgive me, Socrates, but these men have come from afar with a purpose that seems to me noble and unselfish. Would you not hear them?

SOCRATES: What is the purpose?

SMITH: Socrates, we have come to take you back with us before the fatal ship anchors tomorrow outside the harbor, back to the United States of America. It's a big country, outside the limits of the little world known to

you, on a vast continent discovered nearly two thousand years after your death. It has many millions of people. Most of them have heard of you, Socrates. Lots of them would like to know you better. You would find hundreds, even millions through our up-to-date communications, to whom you could teach the truth. We need you, Socrates.

BROWN: You ought to tell him, Smith, that we have a friend who has invented a machine to lick the time factor. He's fixed it for us to take you back, but we've only got forty minutes. Socrates, you've got to make up your mind fast.

SOCRATES: Crito knows that I have spent a lifetime trying to arrive at only a few conclusions, and that I am not sure even of those. But perhaps after two thousand years and among so many people I could find the truths that have been withheld from me. May I ask each of you what you consider to be the most important truth your people have discovered?

BROWN: Why, Socrates, we've discovered progress. Any one of us can go two miles a minute on the ground, and five or six times that in the air, by flying. Pretty soon we'll be doing a thousand times that. We can bring food from anywhere, keep it cold, and cook it fast. Our houses are warmed in winter and cooled in summer. One woman, working only an hour or two a day, can keep a house clean. We can talk to anybody we want to anywhere in the world, and we can see what is going on anywhere, simply by twisting a button in our houses. And almost everybody is rich enough to afford all these machines. That's what we call progress.

SOCRATES: All these machines, as you describe them, would seem to me to conduce to the pleasures of the body, a subject on which I had proposed to discourse tomorrow. The body is a source of endless trouble to us, and a country which multiplies those troubles has not attained to truth. Your salutation when you entered put your pleasure first, and if machines are the most important matter in your country and if their object is the enhancement of bodily pleasure, your "progress," as you call it, is directed solely toward that end. But perhaps I am wrong. Machines perhaps release men from the time factor—another of your expressions—and allow them to spend many more hours in thought and in discourse, and in knowledge and attainment of the good life. If such be the case, I would be strongly tempted to accept your offer.

SMITH: May I speak, Socrates? The important truth we have discovered, in my opinion, lies right along those lines. We are rich enough to give a college education to almost everyone capable of taking it. And lots of our young people, men and women both, go on to more education for two or three or even seven years. There is plenty of "thought and discourse" there, believe me.

SOCRATES: On what subjects do they discourse, and what is the end and purpose of their discourse?

SMITH: Well, it's not exactly discourse, as you understand the word. We have to train people to make and run the machines, and that takes the more expert knowledge the more complicated machines become. Men have to have every specialized training to build a Univac, for instance, which is a machine that thinks. Then we have

to train people to sell the machines, and other people to manage all of these.

SOCRATES: You say, you train them. That means you already know how they are to be trained? That is the method of the Sophists.

SMITH: Of course we know how to train them. We train their minds, their fingers, and their reflexes. When there's only two seconds to make a decision, a man cannot be allowed to think. He has to be able to act automatically, and correctly.

SOCRATES: What you are describing is a machine and not a man, and yet you say you have invented a machine which thinks.

SMITH: That is right, Socrates; we want men to be as dependable as machines.

SOCRATES: The end of all this education is the service of bodily pleasure, is it not?

SMITH: I suppose you could call it that, Socrates. And yet what is wrong with bodily pleasure. I think you were a little harsh on Brown. Why isn't it good to feel a sense of power in a fast car, to eat well, to be able to buy what one wants? You said that the body is a source of endless trouble; we are eliminating those troubles.

SOCRATES: The mole is a small, blind animal whose bodily pleasures are few and easily satisfied. I can discern no difference between you and the mole, except that your society is somewhat more complicated, and your wants greater. The satisfaction of them is for you a mass effort, but the end is the same.

BROWN: Hell, Socrates, we ain't moles.

SOCRATES: What is the difference between you and the mole? He is trained by nature to work, to fill his belly, to procreate, and to sleep. When his time comes to die, he dies. His only fear is from enemies. Have you enemies in your country?

BROWN: Gosh, Socrates, we're spending a fourth of our national income to protect us from enemies. We are scared to death we are going to be wiped out.

SOCRATES: That amount is not too high a price to pay for the protection of a free state, if the state is really free. But, to continue, from what you have told me thus far there is no difference between you and the mole. Do you not agree? Both of you have a society which exists for and promotes the pleasures of the body.

SMITH: Socrates, you are absolutely unfair. Moles cannot prolong their lives. Our doctors have extended the normal span of a man's life by many, many years. All of their efforts are devoted to alleviating pain, to curing disease, to removing malignant parts from the body. They are a selfless and dedicated profession, and in their hospitals they work day and night to give a few more hours of breathing to a man whose days are numbered. Moles don't do that.

SOCRATES: Alleviation of pain is desirable, unless pain ennoble the sufferer. Tomorrow I shall die, for you have not yet convinced me that I should accompany you. I have no fear. I shall meet death with equanimity. But from what you tell me, in your country I would not be permitted to meet it in full possession of myself. I would

be compelled, under circumstances not of my choosing, to die, an almost inanimate being, under the eyes of slaves and assistants who did not know me. If this is the end to which medical research in your country has reduced the dignity of death, I prefer to have none of it. I choose to die tomorrow, with my friends around me, in full possession of my faculties until the end, so that I may command my dying as I have commanded my living.

SMITH: Put it that way, Socrates, you have a point. But what do you say about prolonging of life?

SOCRATES: It is not your function to ask the questions here, Smith, but mine. But since you have asked it, I would say that the prolonging of life beyond the point when men can grow in knowledge, or are useful to their families, their society, or the Republic, is a question deserving the serious consideration which apparently you in your country have not given it. But I would know more about the specialists, to whom you seem to have given over your society.

SMITH: Why condemn the specialist, Socrates? You have said you want knowledge, and I think I am right in saying that to you knowledge and virtue are the same. In our country no one man can know all. There are some who express energy, which is the ultimate stuff of the universe, in mathematical terms incomprehensible except to the few. There are some who know the origins, long before Pericles, of the Greece in which you live. Some study the nature of the forces which make a society move, such as the pressure of the economic factors, and the reasons why men in the mass act as they do. Our society has a knowledge infinitely greater than yours ever

had or hoped to have. And all of these talents, all of this knowledge, can be called upon and put to right uses when the need arises.

SOCRATES: Your statement raises questions I had never considered. I have never understood all the mathematical equations involved in building the steps of the Parthenon, and yet the Parthenon, depending upon the work of specialists, is a perfect whole, including those steps. I can see how a man in charge may command the services of specialists, without being able himself to perform what they perform. Yet the Parthenon was a problem of inanimate mass, and you are now talking of mass that lives. The man in charge in your country—does he understand how to command the services of all your specialists? Does he know the varieties of knowledge which presumably only he can bring together? If, perchance, some question should arise involving the position of Greece, would he ask the experts who know about Greece before my time? Would he ask the experts on economic factors, to use your expression, how far their ideas fit into the other factors which make up Greece of your time? Assuming, of course, that there still is a Greece.

SMITH: It's curious you should ask that question, Socrates. Of course there is a Greece, and it is part of the world you knew which is proving very troublesome today. The eastern Mediterranean, for a variety of reasons which I shall not now explain, has become as important to us today as when you lived. To answer your question candidly, I would have to admit that the experts are not

being asked for their opinion on the proper manner of dealing with the problem.

SOCRATES: Then I must assume that the man in charge has not sufficient knowledge to command the knowledge of the experts he needs.

SMITH: You are right, Socrates, nor has the man in charge in our country ever had sufficient knowledge. We are too complicated a society to use the services of all our experts.

SOCRATES: I begin to understand the nature of your society of specialists. If a tyrant should emerge, possessing the ability to use their services to his own advantage, what would prevent him from making slaves of you all?

SMITH: That can scarcely happen with us, Socrates, for we are a society of free men who cherish their freedom.

SOCRATES: The specialist, as you describe him, is not a free man. He can exist only as a part of the whole. He is dependent upon the whole, and has no meaning apart from the specialized function he performs. His knowledge is a small part of the total knowledge of your society, and is not therefore the knowledge which, in an individual man, leads to virtue. Your knowledge leads to power, not virtue. Your specialist would seem to me to be already a slave.

SMITH: Socrates, you are wrong in calling us a society of slaves, and in denying that a specialist can live his own life. Look at music in our country, for instance. You may sit before an orchestra of a hundred players, who blend on scores of instruments notes that unite in glory and precision, cleansing the heart, soothing and inspiring

the spirit. It is music far beyond what your instruments could produce. Many composers over many years have built upon the achievements of one another, until mastery of sound, such music as we might imagine the gods to have heard, can become the experience of everyone who wishes. And those who so wish number millions.

SOCRATES: You have been moved to rhetoric, Smith, by your music, far beyond your usual words, and I confess I should like the experience of hearing it. Music is granted to us for the sake of harmony; and harmony, which has motions akin to the revolutions of our souls, is not regarded by the intelligent votary of the Muses as given with a view to irrational pleasure, but as meant to correct any discord which may have arisen in the courses of the soul. Are your composers still producing greater and nobler symphonies than any composed before?

SMITH: Well, no. Our audiences prefer music written from seventy-five to a hundred and fifty years ago. But we have hopes among our younger composers. (*Aside to BROWN:*) Don't tell him about boogie-woogie and rock 'n roll.

SOCRATES: Slaves may listen to music, but only free men can compose.

BROWN: Socrates, I don't understand what you're getting at with all this talk about specialists and slaves. We're a democracy, barging ahead believing that anything a democracy does is okeh.

SOCRATES: This confidence I admire without approving. May I ask how your country is governed, and whether the men in charge are the ablest and wisest among you?

BROWN: Every two years we have an election, and the best man wins. Every four years we elect a president, and it's the people who elect him.

SMITH: Socrates, I see what you are getting at. I will admit at once that the best and wisest are not elected. Sometimes we elect a man beyond our deserts. But for the most part we elect men whose career is politics, and, if I remember enough of the history of Greece in your time, you will understand what I mean.

SOCRATES: Are the people completely free in their choice, unswayed by demagogues?

BROWN: Why sure they are, Socrates. We have the secret ballot.

SOCRATES: The hand that casts the ballot may move in secret, but the mind that directs the hand may belong to another.

BROWN: I don't know what you mean, Socrates. Can't understand it. My mind's my own.

SOCRATES: So you appear to believe. I do not deny that there are some bits of information in your mind. From where did you derive them?

BROWN: Why, everybody knows them. We were taught them in school, and we hear them over the radio and television every day. We read them in the papers and the magazines.

SOCRATES: These are the means of mass communications you mentioned earlier, I infer.

BROWN: Sure they are, Socrates, and we have developed them more highly than any people in the world

ever did. They would go for you, Socrates. You'd get the highest Trendex rating. By the way, we've only ten minutes left.

SOCRATES: You have mentioned television. What is it?

BROWN: Gosh, Socrates, it is the most wonderful thing. You can sit in your own home and you can see pictures. You used to have to go out to go to the theater. Now you can see it at home. And things that are happening in the world, everywhere, you can see them. Believe me, television is a great educational invention.

SOCRATES: And, if I came to America, would people see pictures of me?

BROWN: You are doggone right they would, Socrates. That is what we have been saying about you as a push-over on mass communications. Put it all together, Socrates, and you spell "mother."

SOCRATES: Spelling "mother" is as unusual a concept to me as the notion that pictures of a human being in the flesh can picture his mind. I am ugly, the ugliest man in Athens, I have been told, and yet my mind I have tried to keep completely removed from the body, and engaged on the good, the beautiful, and the just. How can your pictures portray what is taking place in men's minds?

BROWN: Why, Socrates, all you have to see is a guy winning the Olympic games, appearing before a congressional committee, on the President's meet-the-press program, as the only survivor of an airplane crash, and what more do you want?

SOCRATES: Only everything but that. I know now about television. Let us return to the more important topic.

Who owns the means of communication? Is it the government, which, as you have said, does not consist of the virtuous, but of the politicians? From the tone of your voice I can see you do not regard politicians highly.

SMITH: Once again, Brown, I would speak, seeing a little of what Socrates has in mind. It is true, Socrates, that mass communications is a business, a gigantic business, and that its interests are tied in with those of other businesses.

SOCRATES: Whatever conflicts with the interests of business, whose goals are money and power, therefore ought not be tolerated by business. I speak in business terms only. Is it not true? In Athens any man may speak before the citizens, who will, up to a point, hear him, though they may disagree. But in your country a man with ideas opposed to those of business would not be allowed to use these new means of communication. I fear that if I were put on television, I would not last beyond a month, and my Trendex rating would cease to exist.

BROWN: Why, Socrates, a college professor a few months ago cleaned up over a hundred thousand dollars.

SMITH: S-sh, Brown. You are wasting time. Socrates does not run that kind of quiz show. Let me tell him that he is really being unfair. There are thousands of people in our country who believe in the worth of the individual, and they are genuinely worried about the threat to freedom of thought and of speech which this new development is bringing. Among them are many high-principled businessmen who sit on the boards of trustees of colleges and symphony orchestras and foundations and

so on. There are thousands of high-principled ministers, schoolteachers, writers, and executive directors of non-profit-making organizations striving to find an answer to the problem of living the good life in the twentieth century. They would welcome you, Socrates. There are even corporations which would give you an uninterrupted hour on the air every Sunday afternoon.

SOCRATES: You spoke of millions, and now you speak of thousands. Perhaps these thousands are so few and so harmless, writing and talking only to themselves as they do, that they can be tolerated until they become dangerous. Then, for them, as for me, the hemlock. Have any of these thousands ever been attacked for undermining the morals of the youth?

BROWN: You said a mouthful then, Socrates. We don't let any Red or anybody who knows a Red get away with anything.

SOCRATES: Almost you persuade me to come, Brown. I should like to meet a Red, and to question him. I have in my life questioned many who disagreed with me, and have even, as with the Sophists, been moved if never convinced by their arguments. Such discussion of the ultimate points at difference between opposing philosophies might be of value to peoples in other countries who remain undecided.

BROWN (*with rising anger*): Don't be absurd, Socrates. In the first place, you couldn't meet a Red today, thank heaven, and if you did, you could not be on television with him, and if you could, he couldn't speak his mind, because he hasn't got any. He believes exactly what his government tells him to believe. He is not a free man.

SOCRATES: Does not this return us to the discussion of a moment ago? Should we repeat it? I notice, Brown, that you swear both by heaven and by hell. Is there any difference in your mind between them?

BROWN: I'll have nothing more to do with you, Socrates. I won't answer any more questions. This isn't a court of law, and I'm not pleading the Fifth Amendment. I'm through, that's all. I wish I had never come. Besides, a man's religion is his own affair. You're a Red yourself.

SMITH: Please, please, Brown. Socrates is not in that camp. One minute is left, Socrates. What may I do to persuade you?

SOCRATES: You may tell me, Smith, if you will, whether there is any group in your country with whom I could discuss at length the great questions of knowledge, and of virtue, and of the good life?

SMITH: I know of one, Socrates. It is made up of men from all walks of life. Some are successful, some are less so. Some have made great contributions to the knowledge of which you speak; some have not. What binds them together is their love of ideas. They would rejoice in having you as a member, and I would put your name up for election myself.

SOCRATES: And could we walk together, and go to the baths together, and dine together daily? Most of my discourses are going to take over a hundred pages when they come to be printed; none will be less than thirty. We have touched too briefly this morning upon too many topics. I would go if I could live and talk out these and other questions with such a group as you describe.

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SMITH: I'm afraid that's impossible, Socrates. They are busy men. You could present a paper, and not a very long one, once every two or three years.

SOCRATES: Then even the best among you have no time for thought. Yours is not a country in which I would want to live. Crito, show these gentlemen out. And, Crito, tell the keeper of the prison I shall not wait until tomorrow. Have him bring in the hemlock now.

THIS PAPER WAS WRITTEN FOR THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB AND READ BEFORE THE CLUB ON MONDAY EVENING, THE EIGHTH OF APRIL, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-SEVEN. THIS EDITION OF THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY COPIES WAS PRINTED FOR THE CLUB BY ITS MEMBERS IN THE MONTH OF DECEMBER, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-SEVEN.

PRINTED IN U.S.A.