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SOCRATIC INTEGRITY

GEORGE KATEB

The word *integrity* is derived from the Latin word *integer*, which means whole or wholeness and hence entirety or completeness and, by implication or extension, being unimpaired, uncompromised, and uncorrupted and being blameless. Things and conditions as well as persons can have or lack integrity. We can say that a person has integrity, then, when he or she has a certain concentration or purity or consistency. We can spell out these meanings a bit by saying that one has or shows integrity when one is entirely present (episodically or over a whole life) in what one does; one is all there; and one has all one's force of character and resources of action at one's disposal and under one's control. Relatedly, one has or shows integrity when one acts as oneself only, rather than unconsciously or thoughtlessly mixing in with oneself the attitudes or habits of others, imitating others without a sense of self-loss. Yet another description of integrity emphasizes a person's ability to remain steadfast to a commitment through thick and thin, overcoming internal and external obstacles, and devoting his or her whole life to that commitment or defining one's identity by reference to it. Integrity may also include standing alone for the sake of some commitment or other and refusing to go along with others or be incorporated in their plans or deeds. Thus, one remains whole by refusing to be included in an objectionable larger whole.

These brief accounts of integrity are derived from common

usage, and they also seem to suit Socrates quite well. That we apply to Socrates descriptions of integrity that probably were derived in part from his words and acts in the first place is a harmless circularity. He has helped mold later ideas of integrity. And if returning to his words and deeds may revivify a sense of his integrity and his right, even, to help define integrity, the fact remains that integrity as Socrates practiced it shows some strange features. My purpose in this chapter is to explore some of these features. For the most part, I concentrate on Socrates as Plato presented him in the *Apology of Socrates*, with some attention to the *Crito*. Whether or not the Socrates of the *Apology*, especially, was the real Socrates in every main feature cannot be established. Let it suffice to say that if it were not for the *Apology* but also the *Crito*, Socrates would not have been as influential in helping define integrity as he has proved to be. The hold of Socrates on the imagination altogether, but certainly on the understanding of the meaning of integrity, would be much less without these two works.

The strangeness of Socrates is owing to his negativity. It is no revelation to say that Socrates wrote nothing and maintained that he knew nothing. These are among his most famous manifestations of negativity. But his negativity is comprehensive and calls for an accounting that makes it constitutive of his integrity. That is, he may be a model of integrity because he is so extensively negative.

I use the word *negativity* to include more than the two manifestations just mentioned. Socrates practices negativity also in the sense that he says no to the doctrines of others without producing one of his own; his inner voice never says yes, but only no; he works on the hypothesis that the content of his wisdom is nothing, is ignorance; he knows what injustice is, not what virtuous excellence is; he knows how to act by abstention, avoidance, self-denial, and noncompliance; and he is prepared to contemplate eternal nothingness after death. There are other manifestations of negativity as well. Socrates' unforgettable presence is thus put together from elements that seem to lack any fullness, any positive definition. His integrity is nevertheless perfectly full; as a personage, he is most positively defined. But his fullness and definition arise

from negativity. (At the end of this chapter, I will qualify this assertion.)

Thinking about Socrates may lead us to decide that any kind of integrity that takes him as a model must follow him in accentuating the negative (to negate an old song). To put it more strongly: there may not likely be a *secular* integrity unless negativity is, so to speak, affirmed. This is not to say that every feature of Socrates' integrity must be incorporated into all versions of secular integrity. Thoreau, for example, is powerfully inspired by Socrates and is equally negative. Yet he may be even more secular than Socrates, and he certainly introduces creative changes in the theory and practice of secular integrity.

On a theoretical level, perhaps the starkest contrast to Socratic integrity is found in the Aristotelian ideal system: a picture of full virtuous excellence authenticated by reference to a confident understanding of human nature and the human condition. Aristotelian integrity is integrity of a radically different kind, and to one who prizes the Socratic model, the Aristotelian kind can look both spurious and dangerous.

It may be useful to see in Socrates a model of two kinds of integrity, one intellectual and the other moral. He shows *intellectual* integrity by a single-minded intensity or concentration in pursuit of truth or of wisdom, but this pursuit issues in only a perpetual dissatisfaction. It is as if intellectual integrity must lead not so much to a strict skepticism as to a residual tentativeness or uncertainty about what one accepts as true. Some conclusions that others offer are clearly mistaken or confused. Socrates is prepared to say no to them, but to say no (even many times) does not automatically produce a yes (even after a long time), that is, a definite conclusion amenable to sustained elaboration. What his intensity or concentration earns him is the right to maintain that he has avoided common or prevalent errors. His truth or wisdom is negative: freedom from avoidable error on the most important matters.

Socrates shows *moral* integrity in his strict avoidance of injustice. He tries to demonstrate purity in his conduct toward others. He thinks he may be doing good to people by being continuously available for conversation and thus getting them to think. But

when he engages in worldly action, in acts of citizenship, his whole concern is to avoid injustice. Depriving others of what is theirs, in accordance with their own understanding of what is properly theirs, is injustice; he will not ever act so to deprive them. His justice is abstention from the dispossession of others. In contrast, actively giving them or distributing to them some worldly good they lack but may deserve is not his moral aim as an actor in the world. He does not claim to know what anyone is positively owed. As for himself, after the Athenian jury finds him guilty, he can say that what he really deserves at the hands of Athens is "free meals at the prytaneum."¹ But it is only at the end that he estimates his own worth, and he does so only to throw irony on the requirement that he propose a counterpenalty to the death penalty proposed by his prosecutor, Meletus. Socrates does not have to know what anyone is worth because he does know what doing injustice amounts to. The avoidance of injustice lies within his power and places no exceptional demand on his knowledge.

The two kinds of integrity, which I have separated, exist, of course, in the same person. How are they connected? Do they have the same root in one commitment? Do they have equal worth, or is one kind an instrument of the other? Or are they only accidentally copresent? I am tempted to say that Socrates' intellectual integrity is at the service of his moral integrity and therefore does not exist for its own sake, for the sake of exact understanding. The fury that drives him to destroy the argumentative positions of others (as shown in some of Plato's inconclusive dialogues like the *Euthyphro*) is the conviction that assurance about one's rightness of opinion is rarely justified but that out of unearned assurance grows the strengthened proclivity to act unjustly. To purge himself and other people of substantive ideas is to induce greater hesitation in action.

Socrates' intellectual integrity is thus a weapon in his war on opinions that engender or nurture injustice. He would not be so relentless in examining others if he did not think that he could slow them down. He is not, however, offering a positive vision, for he has none to offer. His intellectual integrity does not prepare the way for correct substantive ideas about virtue or matters of any other kind. No clever intellection is needed to ascertain the

nature of injustice. That is why I am tempted to think that for Socrates, intellectual integrity is a means to reducing the amount of injustice in the world—a purpose for which his life itself is a means. In regard to his own opinions, his intellectual integrity steadies his soul in his own determination to avoid doing injustice. At the same time, to promote the intellectual integrity of others by his relentless questioning— even though most people will not likely attain a high level—is to serve a moral cause. What I say here is naturally only a rough first statement about Socrates' intellectual integrity.

If we proceed with the assumption that the center of Socrates' integrity is moral integrity, we can look at some of its prominent features in their negativity. Then we will have reason to return to his intellectual integrity.

In the *Apology*, Socrates says that he is convinced that he has never wronged anyone deliberately.² This is a tremendous claim for a person to make about himself; the presumptuousness is considerable of entering a judgment about oneself and one's whole life heretofore. The majority of the jury finally does not agree with Socrates about himself. They thought that he has wronged the whole city, and quite deliberately. Now that he has been formally accused, they are ready to see as injurious the whole tendency of Socrates' life as a questioner, even though he thinks that his questioning is the greatest service that can be rendered to the city. The dispute cannot be settled amicably; the city has the last word. There is, however, nothing or very little that is speculative about doing wrong in the specific sense of acting unjustly toward another person. On this matter, Socrates makes a case that seems right, and none of the accusers tries to rebut it.

Socrates recounts in the *Apology* two political episodes in which he was involved. These episodes offer powerful support for the moral judgment that he makes of himself. In the first episode, he acts by being the only one to vote no; in the second, he acts by refusing to obey an order. Dissent and noncompliance constitute the salience of his active or direct citizenship, which is therefore negative. Moreover, in both cases, he is hardly a volunteer. When he dissents, he has to vote because it is the turn of his tribe to serve on the panel that prepares the agenda for the Assembly.

When he refuses to obey, he is picked by the Tyrants to carry out a mission. For the rest of the time, he refuses involvement; he does not give speeches in the agora;³ and he explicitly refers to the fact that the public speech he gives to the jury, which is, as it were, wrung from him, is unique: the dire accusation against him occasions his first appearance (of any kind) in a law court.⁴

In the background is Socrates' general abstention, which derives from his wish not to implicate himself in the wrongdoing that the Assembly regularly sponsors. He says:

There is no man who will preserve his life for long, either in Athens or elsewhere, if he firmly opposes the multitude, and tries to prevent the commission of much injustice and illegality in the state. He who would really fight for justice must do so as a private citizen, not as a political figure, if he is to preserve his life, even for a short time.⁵

The public voice of the leadership tends to corrupt any group of people. To answer that public voice with one's own voice in public would lead to nothing but the ruin or death of the person who made the effort and hence to the waste of an opportunity to do what one could do in one's everyday way to fight injustice. Socrates would wish to be the same person in public life as he is in private,⁶ to speak in the same private voice about public matters, especially when injustice is urged. Although private interest regularly succeeds in cloaking itself in public purpose, a sincere private voice in a political place is not heard, or it is ridiculed or denounced as harmful. Socrates concerns himself with his own purity, but he conceives his purity as inseparable from avoiding injustice—that is, from not being an instrument of wronging others.

A principal negative element of Socrates' integrity is to abstain from hopelessly unjust active citizenship. Nevertheless, he does not absent himself from his duty in the panel of the Council of the Assembly when it is his tribe's turn. Thus, in the first episode, 406 B.C., ten victorious military leaders in a battle off the Arginusae Islands were severely criticized for neglecting to pick up the dead and rescue survivors. Pressure built to try the leaders as a group, rather than separately, and the panel succumbed; Socrates was the sole dissenter. The issue was, to use a modern term, due

process of law: fairness dictated separate and unrushed trials and in a proper court. Seeming niceties of legal procedure provided Socrates the unwanted but accepted opportunity to stand up for principle. What is the principle? Avoiding injustice. Eventually six were tried together, condemned, and executed. The result was a foregone conclusion; injustice had to happen.⁷

Notice that in opposing public pressure in 406 B.C., and then seven years later at his own trial retrospectively explaining his dissent, Socrates does not appeal to any special, much less subjective, notion of injustice. Instead, he tries to hold Athens to its own principle of right conduct, which here involves not positive reward but deprivation: punishment in the form of death. The principle is that we should not harm—in the sense of wronging—the innocent; stated more narrowly, we should not harm—punish—those who have not been found guilty by means of a proper legal procedure.

The same conception of injustice covers the second episode. Socrates refuses the order by the Tyrants in 404 B.C. to apprehend Leon of Salamis and take him to Athens and certain death.⁸ He does not say that the Thirty Tyrants had no legitimacy and hence could not validly order anyone to do anything; he does imply, however, that Leon was an innocent man who was the victim of official persecution. He includes the treatment of Leon as among the crimes of the Tyrants, who sought cynically and self-protectively to implicate as many people as possible in them.

If the principle that Socrates stands up for is part of Athenian life and not of his invention, he does adhere to that principle even to the point of self-sacrifice. He is willing to sacrifice himself, his life, rather than abandon the principle. He will adhere to his negative morality, cost what it may (to use Thoreau's phrase from "Civil Disobedience"). This is where the moral novelty of Socrates in the *Apology* is found. As he is well aware, many men risk death in battle.⁹ Whatever any particular soldier's motivation may be—whether fear or interest or honor, or only conformity or habit—premature death or, perhaps just as bad, the threat of enslavement is a constant accompaniment. War is the central institution of citizenship.

Socrates likens himself, in his dissent and noncompliance, not only to a soldier who does his duty but also to Achilles.¹⁰ But these

comparisons obscure the main thing, which is that Socrates risks life and freedom in situations in which no one else does. He stands alone, as one person, as his naked moral self. He has only himself to fall back on. His courage is for the sake of refusing to be an instrument of injustice. The enemy he fights alone is his own city, when the city fails to be faithful to its own best principle, which is also his own: not to wrong or penalize the innocent (actual or putative). The city does not risk itself by avoiding injustice in the matter of the military leaders or of Leon. Morality on these occasions is free of cost to any licit interest. Socrates is not asking the city or anyone else for the kind of sacrifice he asks of himself.

Where is the precedent for Socrates' action, for his distinctive moral heroism? In the ordinary sense of self-sacrifice, Socrates is self-sacrificingly moral; his moral integrity is extreme. Moral integrity must cost something, but one can have some measure of it without practicing it, "cost what it may." We need not build extreme self-sacrifice into the very definition of moral integrity. To be sure, he is not hounded or put to death because of either of the two episodes; there is no indication that they played any role in the accusations against him or in the judgment of his guilt and the sentence of death. But when he acted, he did not know whether he would lose his life or liberty as a result. He took enormous chances, chances that no one else would have taken. That he was over sixty when he did so does not mean he would not have done so if the occasions had arisen when he was younger, even if it is true that for some people—whatever may hold for Socrates—to contemplate death is easier when older than when younger.

Let us also notice that just as there is nothing religious in Socrates' understanding of injustice, so neither does the answer of the priestess at Delphi nor the existence of Socrates' inner voice have anything to do with his moral heroism. There is probably a connection between Socrates' courage in the cause of avoiding injustice and a surmise he entertains about what it means to be dead. (I shall return to this point.) But that surmise is purely Socrates' own; it comes from no divine instruction; it promises no reward in the afterlife for moral heroism; it is purely secular.

That Socrates is also a hero of another kind as well—a hero in

the cause of truth in the negative sense of dispelling errors—is undeniable. Here, there may be something religious in the inspiration of his courage. The inner voice does not deter Socrates from appearing at his trial and speaking as he does.¹¹ The answer given by the priestess—no one is wiser than Socrates¹²—is construed by Socrates as a mandate to pursue wisdom, cost what it may. He says that if the city were to offer to release him from the charges against him on the condition that he henceforth abstain from his inquiries, he would reject the proposal. “I should reply: ‘Athenians, I hold you in the highest regard and affection, but I will be persuaded by the god rather than you.’ ”¹³ Something religious may fortify him here to be self-sacrificing, but it is not anything conventionally religious. In any case, the motivation of his dissent and noncompliance for the sake of avoiding injustice has different grounds from his persistence in philosophical questioning, even though this persistence is finally also for moral purposes, for the sake of enabling others to promote or lend themselves to injustice less.

The question arises as to the importance of Socrates’ dissent and noncompliance. They were not followed by a subsequent deed or gesture of protest, much less by resistance alone or with others (if others could be found). Furthermore, Socrates fought in three battles just before or during the Peloponnesian War and thus did in fact lend himself to the systemic promotion or defense of imperialism—that is, injustice on a great scale. Although Diogenes Laertius records that Socrates turned down Charmides’ gift of slaves,¹⁴ there is no indication that Socrates criticized the institution of slavery—the capture of slaves in war and the codification of their bondage in law. Isn’t it the case, then, that in risking his life in the two episodes, Socrates is courageous but for reasons that show a lack of proportion: too much courage in small affairs and none at all in large ones? And by doing nothing to try to change the system, doesn’t he strain at a gnat in each episode and swallow a camel?

Certainly, by reformist and pragmatic standards, Socrates’ negative citizenship had no political effect in his time, however one may judge his later influence by example in the annals of conscientious and nonviolent politics. Perhaps, after all, he is interested

only in the future—in his subtle and long-term effects on the moral imagination. He has no illusions about his immediate efficacy: he says that he would have perished long before if he had been politically outspoken.¹⁵ To the charge that he takes a heroic stand only in comparatively minor public situations, one can offer a reason that Socrates does not give. (Indeed, he does not indicate any awareness of the possibility of misplaced or disproportionate heroism.) The reason, however, is not foreign to Socrates' world. It is implicit, for example, in the successful effort of Diodotus, as recorded by Thucydides, to reverse the Athenian decision (428 B.C.) to kill the population of Mytilene, a rebellious confederate.¹⁶ Certainly Socrates would not have given a speech like Diodotus's. Deliberately, even if transparently, Diodotus employs arguments that do not fully represent his own views. He clothes moral reasons in tough-minded calculations. He thinks he would not have been heard otherwise. He speaks to win. Morality needs him no less than it needs Socrates, even if Socrates' integrity is greater.

In any event, common to Socrates and Diodotus seems to be a hopeless resignation to the occurrence of large-scale tendencies of wrongdoing, especially toward other cities. The wrongdoing is systemic; it is almost unconscious, so ingrained and inveterate are the cultural causes of it. To be aggressive, predatory; to act to the limit of one's capacity and to attempt to act beyond it; to desire to possess more than one's share, as if true satisfaction exists beyond mere satisfaction; to see in one's power not so much a stake to defend as a precondition for transgressive adventure; and to thrive on risk, especially to one's continued existence—all this is the project of individual and group masculinity, the project of hubris and pleonexia, of rejecting the very idea of limits. This project is so driven that it cannot be withstood. But there is no excuse for base, small-minded horrors; people know better, or ought to; no imagination is required to see the wrong. People should not be carried away and in a real or manufactured passion initiate or sanction an atrocity or a profound evil of detail. That they do know better is proved by their repentance.

The Athenian Assembly rescinded the decree condemning the Mytilenians. But the Athenian ship carrying the decree made no haste to reach the city, so reluctant was the mission.¹⁷ Likewise, Socrates says that the Athenians eventually realized that the deci-

sion to try the military leaders as a group was illegal.¹⁸ (Later in the *Crito*, he says that the many who casually put men to death would as casually bring them back to life if they could.¹⁹ Socrates' words do not imply that the people do villainy and then repent but, rather, that they are generally incontinent and their incontinence sometimes causes them to feel a vague disquiet. Their bad deeds are halfhearted, partly unmeant.)

The view that I have just sketched is only one possible way of making plausible the pattern of Socrates' political episodes against the background of his general abstention. There is no doubt that my rationalization has an affinity with the perverse notion that, say, a country can do anything it likes in the field of foreign affairs as long as it treats its prisoners of war correctly and follows other rules of war or that a system of slavery is tolerable as long as the slaves are not constantly brutalized. But the sense of things that I would like to attribute to Socrates contains no excuse for the large-scale tendency or system of wrongdoing in the midst of which a morally heroic episode suddenly appears, with the overall wrongdoing left untouched. Socrates excuses nothing: his general abstention is a general condemnation. When the Socrates of the *Gorgias* says that Pericles left the Athenians much wilder than they were when he took over,²⁰ the assertion is in keeping with the sentiments of the Socrates of the *Apology*.

I do not mean to suggest that the negative and episodic politics in which Socrates engages is the only politics compatible with some measure of integrity, whatever Socrates may have thought. One can imagine a tolerably good officeholder devoting himself or herself to doing only the lesser and necessary evil while also doing as much good as possible. But we have to strain hard to imagine someone like that. Those who are attracted to office are not attracted to a strict economy of wrongdoing. They are eager to do, to act, even if they are not devotees of the project of masculinity, cost what it may to morality, or even if they are not eager to pursue it precisely because it is immoral. The world cannot do without officeholders, but it has something to learn from pondering the nature of Socrates' citizenship. His episodes teach a lesson beyond themselves: the baseness of particular political decisions may direct attention to the larger tendency or system in its regular and cumulative wrongdoing. To the extraordinary

excesses of politics-as-masculinity, ordinary moral resistance may be futile, whereas extraordinary gestures of independent and solitary self-sacrificial morality may alone have a countervailing grandeur. These gestures have the masculine antimasculinity that answers to political hubris and pleonexia.

There is one more noteworthy episode in Socrates' political life—his refusal to escape from prison and from capital punishment. This refusal, too, may be seen as self-sacrificial morality: sacrificing oneself rather than doing injustice. The question is what principle covers Socrates' decision. In the *Apology*, the principle that covers his dissent and noncompliance is to avoid wronging the innocent (actual or putative), which he carries to a self-sacrificial length. He does not expect from any other person or any collectivity self-sacrifice for the sake of avoiding injustice. Nevertheless, Socrates' own integrity is partly defined by a willingness to risk death or loss of freedom in order to uphold a commonly accepted principle.

This principle is not only regularly breached in self-interested disregard of justice, but it also seems to allow people to suspend it if their own life or freedom is somehow endangered through no fault of their own—as when, for example, their choice is the one faced by Socrates: to be an instrument of injustice or to risk suffering a loss of life or freedom. He insists on preferring others to himself, preferring death to serving injustice. But what is involved in his staying in prison to face death, rather than escaping? It does not do to say that Socrates disobeys the state only when it acts with procedural irregularity and always obeys it when it acts with procedural regularity. It is not clear that he would ever obey, in any circumstances, a validly issued order to cease philosophizing with others. He is not a pure proceduralist. Procedural irregularity matters decisively to him when it is a device of substantive injustice. That it makes sense for us to speak of the inherent morality of procedural regularity is not relevant to the Socrates of the *Apology*.

He claims to know that he is innocent of the charges. He is innocent in his own eyes. He does not corrupt the youth by teaching new divinities, much less by teaching atheism. By not escaping he therefore becomes an instrument of political injustice, this time to himself. If before, especially in regard to the

Tyrants, he had risked death by his intransigent refusal to obey, he is now obedient unto death, his own unjust death. Why is he obedient? In the *Crito*, Socrates gives a number of reasons for his decision. Among them are two basic principles, as well as several considerations not neatly connected to either of the two principles. Socrates may stay to die, however, not because of any principle or consideration but because in his integrity he does not want to associate the practice of relentless questioning (in the name of dispelling errors) with anything less than heroism, physical heroism like that of Achilles in the face of certain death soon to come. Comparing himself with Achilles better suits the Socrates of the *Crito* than the Socrates of the two episodes in the *Apology*.

These reasons do not satisfy. They are thrown out in a rush as if to overpower the auditor and leave him little time to answer. Likening himself to the frenzied worshipers of Cybele, an earth goddess, Socrates says that his arguments sound in his ears like the music of flutes: "The sound of these arguments rings so loudly in my ears, that I cannot hear any other arguments."²¹ This sound is not the sound of intellectual integrity. More important, the reasons do not satisfy because in moral complexion, the *Crito* is perhaps closer to the *Gorgias* than to the *Apology*. The *Crito*, like the *Gorgias*, gives too much to an almost masochistic severity to the self, to the practice of authoritative punishment, and to servile deference to properly constituted authority. Socrates opens up a vast gulf between what he allows political authority to do and what he allows individuals to do. This is not the same gulf as separates the morally allowable suspension of morality in cases of terrible risk for individuals and the insistence, for oneself, that one face terrible risk instead of being a party to treating others unjustly.

When we try to find the principle, two emerge. The first is the same one invoked in the *Apology*: a self-sacrificing avoidance of doing injustice or being its instrument. The second one is altogether novel: when treated unjustly by the state or others, an individual should never retaliate. The difficulty is to ascertain which of the two really covers Socrates' refusal to escape. I do not think that we can unambiguously determine the matter. The cause of the ambiguity lies in ascertaining the agent that is the recipient or beneficiary of Socrates' enactment of—submission to—moral principle. Is it the city and its laws? Or is it those men who, acting

by means of a valid and intrinsically fair legal procedure, arrived at a substantively mistaken, perhaps maliciously motivated, and seriously unjust decision? (It was only by a comparatively small majority: if only thirty votes, out of five hundred or so, had changed sides, the outcome would have been different).²² In his discussion with his old friend Crito, Socrates appears to shift the identity of the object of his self-sacrifice. He also seems to shift the identity of the source of the injustice done to him.

The upshot is as follows: If it is men, not the laws,²³ who visited injustice on him, then to seek to escape their judgment is to retaliate against them in the sense that he would treat them unjustly, as they had treated him. The whole avowedly novel and peculiar doctrine of nonretaliation is first enunciated in the *Crito*, with the implication that to escape would be to treat unjustly the jurors who had condemned him to death unjustly; to treat them as they had treated him. The retaliation is not in kind; rather, it repays an unjust effect with an unjust intention (vengeance). Retaliation is made to look worse than the initial act of injustice.

But it is not clear to me that the doctrine of nonretaliation as Socrates initially formulates it pertains to the mistaken and perhaps malicious jurors. Perhaps a more suitable referent awaits these unprecedented words:

For there is no difference, is there, between doing evil to a man and acting unjustly? . . . Then we ought not repay injustice with injustice or to do harm to any man, no matter what we may have suffered from him. . . . Are we to start in our inquiry from the premise that it is never right either to act unjustly, or to repay injustice with injustice, or to avenge ourselves on any man who harms us, by harming him in return. . . . I myself have believed in it for a long time, and I believe in it still.²⁴

As an individual who is also an uncommon citizen but one who is not necessarily—or necessarily not—setting himself up as a model for collectivities and their leadership, Socrates says that it is right to abstain from punishing the *guilty*. To punish them is to harm or injure them in some sense, and to harm or injure them is to treat them wrongly or unjustly. (The distinctions between these notions tend to disappear.) To give those who have wronged oneself what the world thinks they deserve is to render them

injustice. Socrates avoids injustice when he accepts it for himself. The idea is amazing, but it does not really refer unawkwardly to the jurors.

To what or whom can it refer less awkwardly, even if still not with a perfect fit? After the words just quoted, Socrates begins to speak of the city, not of the particular men who condemned him. If he escapes, he would harm the city; at least part of that harm consists of doing injustice to it. Is the city (condensed into its laws, which are then impersonated by Socrates to speak to him, but of course in words that he has composed and that may, in some respects, be unusual if not novel and unprecedented)—is the city, despite his express denial, guilty of injustice, or wrongdoing, to him? To try to escape would then be to retaliate, to return harm for harm, wrong for wrong. If the city, however, is not guilty, then the doctrine of nonretaliation, as I have said, would not be clearly illustrated by his refusal to escape. But Socrates never says flatly that the city is guilty; to the contrary, as we have seen.²⁵

Perhaps the city is both guilty and innocent. That would mean that both the principle of nonretaliation and the principle of never wronging the innocent (cost what it may) would be needed to cover Socrates' refusal. If the city, is, from one perspective, innocent and only the jurors are guilty of injustice, a case could be made for saying that to escape is to harm the innocent. In accordance with Socrates' insistence that he will not harm the innocent, cost him what it may, he will accept the verdict and wait to die in prison. But if the city is, from another perspective, guilty, Socrates will accept the verdict and not retaliate, not return harm to the city for the harm it inflicted on him. He will not harm the innocent. Also, he will not harm—that is, punish or wrong—the guilty, no matter how much conventional opinion may think that the guilty should always be punished or harmed or wronged by the aggrieved party.

The city is innocent if men, not the laws, effected the miscarriage of justice. The city is guilty if its laws, despite their overall acceptability, could ever lead, through their failure to ensure against drastic human imperfection, to serious injustice. The city is perhaps guilty or perhaps innocent if it sincerely but mistakenly thought that it did the right thing.²⁶

Whether the city is innocent or guilty or both or not quite

either, the harm done by escaping from its judgment is the encouragement given others to disobey a law whenever they thought they could safely do so and for any self-serving purpose whatsoever. Socrates has the laws say: "Do you think that a state can exist and not be overthrown, in which the decisions of law are of no force, and are disregarded and undermined by private individuals?"²⁷

Socrates then supplements this generalized conception of harm with three considerations: if he were to escape, he would be guilty of three vices. First is the vice of ingratitude toward the laws that provided the framework within which Socrates was born and raised and educated. The laws deserve greater honor and obedience than one's parents do; the laws are more truly parents than biological parents are.²⁸ Second is the vice of faithlessness to an implied agreement to obey all laws and decisions. Socrates was free to emigrate without penalty, but he stayed, as if to say that he had freely chosen an allegiance into which he was born but did not have to retain.²⁹ Third is the vice of unfairness because Socrates was given a chance to persuade the city that it was wrong but he failed to take the chance.³⁰ (Apparently, Socrates did not regard his speech at the trial as an effort at persuasion, and he did not want others to see it as such, either.)

These vices are condemnable apart from any direct harm they may inflict. (But their example could prove contagious and thus eventually become a direct source of harm to the city and its laws.) Socrates' escape would display these vices. They would be imputed to him after the fact by a candid observer, himself or another, but they would not motivate the escape. Fear would motivate it, and perhaps also hatred and a spirit of revenge. Moral integrity precludes acting from such motives or passions, just as it precludes acting in such a way as to display major vices like ingratitude, faithlessness, and unfairness in the course of acting from fear or hatred or vengeance. Detestation of the vices should be enough to overcome the strength of powerful self-concerned emotions. But Socrates wants to avoid moral taint for his own sake and also for the sake of the city and for the sake of other individuals.

I have said that I do not think that Socrates' reasons (whether general principles or particular considerations) satisfy. They do

not seem to cover suitably his decision not to escape from prison and death. Neither of the two principles is really appropriate to govern the relationship between an individual citizen and the city or its laws or even between an individual citizen and a group of citizens formally entrusted with an official responsibility (as the jurors were). In the *Apology*, after all, Socrates's concern is to avoid wronging innocent persons when they are the targets of official lawless action. He seeks to protect individuals against the state. But he sides with official injustice in the *Crito*. He treats the city as if it were a hounded and vulnerable individual and thus transforms political duty into a relationship of such personal intensity that it threatens to become malignant.

The principle of nonretaliation, however, shows a moral refinement that is even more extraordinary than the principle of never harming the innocent, cost what it may. But the view that nonretaliation is exemplified when a prisoner cooperates with an unjust punishment is a terrible stain on the very idea of moral integrity; it is a disfigured moral heroism. Such obedience, especially when it is defended by a refined principle, sets a worse precedent than does any kind of disobedience, however motivated, and it also outweighs the value of the example set when an independent thinker faces death alone in a triumph of physical courage. Martyrdom to principle is, of course, poignant. Without it, Socrates' hold on the imagination would be less. If Socrates had escaped into exile, what would Plato have written about him?

Does the Socrates of the *Apology* inevitably lead to the Socrates of the *Crito*? I have already indicated that the *Crito* seems closer to the *Gorgias* than to the *Apology*. I mean that Socrates' arguments in the *Apology* show a freedom of spirit that they do not show in the two other works. Only in the *Apology* does he defend dissent and noncompliance as justified. He seems to have invented these modes of individual citizenship and then compounded his moral originality by practicing these modes to the point of risking loss and destruction. Yet it may be possible, I do not deny, that there is some consonance of character between the Socrates of the *Apology* and the Socrates of the *Crito*. In both works, he is careless of death. In the *Apology*, he risks death to avoid being an instrument of injustice. In the *Crito*, let us say he goes to his death to avoid displaying the vices of ingratitude, faithlessness, and

unfairness. Perhaps the avoidance of these vices matters more to the Socrates of the *Crito* than any abstract moral principle, even though adherence to one or the other principle is what provides the pretext for Socrates' moral gallantry. Perhaps he fears being thought a coward more than he fears anything else. Or perhaps the matter is simply that as Socrates says, a man who subverts the law by escaping from prison may well be supposed a corrupter of youth, and thus Socrates for the first time will have been proved guilty of the crime that originally he was falsely accused of.

The long and short of it is that Socrates shows moral integrity when he acts for others, not for an (as it were patriotic) abstraction like the laws or the city. I say *abstraction* because Socrates barely indicates that the institutions of the Athenian polity embody moral principles worth defending for their own sake, rather than because they happen to be the institutions of Socrates' own city. Devotion to one's city as such is devotion to an abstraction. In contrast, he acts for others, for other specific individuals, or for his fellow citizens as individuals when he dissents and refuses to carry out a murderous command and when he imagines himself choosing death or imprisonment rather than acceding to an offer to remain free and safe provided that he stops questioning others. He consummates his moral integrity when he self-sacrificingly practices the principle of not wronging the innocent, cost what it may. This principle is made vivid in the *Apology*, not the *Crito*.

I have said that his intellectual integrity is for Socrates a means to the end of his moral integrity and that he also tries to induce some intellectual integrity in others to reduce their proclivity to urge or support injustice at home or abroad. Yet to say that his own intellectual integrity is a means to this double moral end is not a formulation that I am certain of. Accordingly, I would like to point out some elements that are implicated in it but that do not all go in the same direction.

Socrates' moral integrity is most fully demonstrated when he risks himself rather than lending himself to injustice. Does his intellectual integrity show itself so riskily? Throughout his life "as a sort of a gadfly,"³¹ he knows he incurred animosity. The old charges against him were that he studied and speculated about things in the heavens and beneath the earth, that he made the

worse argument appear the stronger, and that he taught these practices to others.³² These charges did not win him favor, only fear and ridicule. Socrates denies the old charges but thinks they provide a propitious background for the accusers and their new charges, namely, that he corrupts the young and does not believe in the same divinities that the state believes in, but in new ones.³³ He denies the new charges, too, but he also knows that animosity lies behind them, just as it lay behind the old charges.

Socrates, however, does not seem to say that he had ever thought, until the formal accusation against him, that he was risking death by his practice of persistent questioning and perpetual dissatisfaction with the answers. To be sure, he antagonized specific sectors of the Athenian population by showing the hollowness of their answers to the basic question of what human excellence is, or what it means to excel in what human creatures are naturally capable of,³⁴ or how it is possible to educate people to attain human excellence. Still, if he tended to brand as ignorant and presumptuous the answers offered by political leaders, poets, and craftsmen, if he could say that those with the highest reputation for wisdom were the most unwise “while others who were looked down as common people were much more intelligent,”³⁵ he did not think, it seems, that he was endangering his life or liberty or his continued ability to reside in Athens, despite some apprehensions.

Socrates’ intellectual integrity becomes truly risky when he senses that the outcome of the trial could be his death, and yet he refuses to ingratiate himself with the jury or to plead for forgiveness or leniency. He also insists that if offered a dismissal of the charges on condition that he desist from his public philosophizing, he would refuse the offer. He would go on asking questions and finding the answers ignorant and presumptuous, even if told beforehand that his persistence would lead to his execution.³⁶ Indeed, “whether you acquit me or not, I shall not change my way of life; no, not if I have to die for it many times.”³⁷

It is at the end that intellectual integrity shows itself as self-sacrificing; Athenian tolerance lasted a long time, and it was not inevitable that Socrates would ever have had to face death for the sake of persisting in a life of questioning and not answering. Athens respected and even encouraged *parrhesia*, frankness. This

is not to deny that Socrates would have persisted until the end, cost what it may, even if the end had come much earlier. So if intellectual integrity is the means to a moral end, it is nevertheless true that Socrates would have died for the sake of the means. The means are irreplaceable. But to be prepared to risk much or everything for the means is still not to make the means the end in itself.

Socrates risked death also for the sake of his end, which is negatively moral and consists in the will to avoid treating any individual unjustly. As we have seen, however, Socrates' moral integrity countenances his general political abstention: he would not die young in the wasted effort to change a tendency of policy and a masculinist system of culture that had to produce injustice on a large scale. His moral integrity is self-sacrificing only narrowly and episodically. He has never sought opportunities for moral self-sacrifice. But he has always sought opportunities to practice his intellectual integrity and to try to encourage it in others. He has tried to sow dissatisfaction with received opinion on what is good in life and what human excellence is. What is more, he has inhumanly neglected his own interests and remained poor so that he could engage others philosophically.³⁸ And then he dies, it appears, not because of original and independent moral integrity but because his intellectual integrity somehow catches up with him unawares, and fatally. He regrets nothing and would now deliberately face death rather than ceasing to philosophize with others. Isn't his moral integrity therefore only incidental and his intellectual integrity central? Isn't it more likely the case that neither is a means to the other? Isn't it certainly the case that intellectual integrity is not a means to moral integrity?

In spite of all, I believe that everything in Socrates' intellectual life is devoted to the moral end of reducing injustice in the world. He grants that he has stayed alive rather than participating actively in politics with its risk of death or exile or some unsustainable loss. We grant also that he does not try to be a systemic reformer. Rather, he stays alive to force people, one by one, or a few at a time, to face themselves. His every word, the whole method of ruthless examination (*exetasis*), is devoted to the questions of how to act, what to want, how to conduct a life, what to live for. He is trying to induce, by his perpetual dissatisfaction

with answers, not skepticism but moderation. He is trying to erode the sources of *pleonexia* and *hubris*, which derive their force in part from unchallenged opinion about the goods and ends of life. If he has been generous, though parsimonious, in risking his life for the avoidance of injustice, still he has not wanted to die before he was old, so that he can continue to moderate Athens, at least to attempt to do so, with only a mild expectation of some small success. Perhaps the future Athens will vindicate him.³⁹

In any event, nothing is finally important to Socrates but the struggle against injustice. His labor is animated by the conviction that a disabused mind favors a less raging heart. What is more, intellectual integrity is not required to know what injustice is. I do not see in Socrates a pure will to truth: error irritates him because it is usually an instigation to injustice or a rationalization of it. The most public and powerful errors of opinion concern the goods and ends of life: they all pertain to excellence or happiness. But they are productive mostly of injustice and eventual ruin. High idealism, always mistaken, is corrupting when publicly enacted. It is as if Socrates desires that the questions that social life incessantly raises, if only implicitly, should never be answered; as if he wants the whole subject of positive excellence and composed happiness to remain suspended so that people would concentrate their energies on living more moderately and therefore more modestly. The result would be some reduction of injustice at home and abroad. Socrates' method of intellect, like his whole self, is a sustained refusal to be an instrument of injustice.

Socrates examines others because they do not examine themselves. At best, under Socrates' pressure, they may ultimately learn to examine themselves a little, make their improvident conclusions into questions that are not readily answered. Although the phrase "the unexamined life is not worth living"⁴⁰ need not refer to self-examination, the context gives it such a connotation. People crave this or that worldly good. Socrates asks them and wants them to ask themselves, If they possess that good, is it really good? Does it really give happiness? Does it permanently allay the craving that led to its pursuit or, rather—in T. S. Eliot's words from "Gerontion"—does the giving famish the craving? If people

do not have some worldly good or prize, Socrates wants to delay them in their pursuit so that they may ask themselves, Do I really want this? Couldn't I be happier or less unhappy without it or with less of it? Am I in a competition for no good end? Am I playing somebody's else's game?

Socrates' conception of self-knowledge is, therefore, inseparable from moderation or temperance. Critias, of all people, says in the *Charmides*, a dialogue about temperance, that the phrases "be temperate" and "know yourself" are equivalent.⁴¹ The self-examining person can learn to say, "How many things I can do without!"⁴² Self-examination therefore helps make life somewhat more worth living. But the practice of self-examination is uncommon. If it is odd, perhaps blasphemous, for Socrates to claim that he is guided by an inner and divine sign or voice,⁴³ it is at least as odd to practice self-examination, as he says he does,⁴⁴ and to encourage it in others. For a moral purpose, Socrates is inventing the practice of self-examination, and clearly, his practice of it is far in advance of that of his interlocutors.

From the perspective of this chapter, it is worth noticing that Socratic integrity, moral and intellectual, is dependent on division within the self, not on being at one with oneself, not on having a conventional psychological integrity or wholeness. Self-examination is self-division, and from self-division comes self-knowledge. Self-knowledge turns out to be mostly negative: Socrates discovers that he does not really want the worldly goods and prizes that he is supposed to want; his desires are for other things, which are not positively described. And he also learns to resist certain descriptions made of him; specifically, those of his accusers. He knows himself sufficiently so that they cannot overpower him into forgetting who he is,⁴⁵ even though he may not have a full understanding of who he is or think that he can define himself or be defined by others. The results of self-examination are what they are.

Self-examination is an uncompletable process. It should last until death. Socrates never claims perfect self-knowledge. It would be incompatible with having a self. The Socrates of the *Phaedrus* says that he does not know whether he is as proud as Typhon (a usurpatory monster with a hundred serpents' heads) or a more gentle creature: he is a question to himself.⁴⁶ He can imagine himself capable of the worst. This searching self-exploration,

marked by some trepidation, that is formulated in the *Phaedrus* goes well with the Socrates of the *Apology*.

What is pertinent here is that by practicing self-examination, Socrates shatters his oneness. He breaks himself up into a watcher and a watched. The watcher is not always morally suspicious; it is not the Christian conscience. Although it is distinct from the inner voice, the watcher does reinforce the work of the inner voice, but this voice prohibits Socrates from doing anything that may be *personally* bad—injurious—for himself to do. Neither the inside watcher nor the inner voice is *directly* moral. What, then, is self-examination? The self examining itself may show something like “the ability to hold converse with myself” that Antisthenes, a friend of Socrates, says is the advantage of philosophy.⁴⁷ But a conversation needs more than one speaker. Is the self-examining self two selves?

In the *Apology*, Socrates does not say enough about self-examination for us to decide conclusively that it is a dialogue between me and myself (in Hannah Arendt’s formulation).⁴⁸ If it is, however, does the watched self talk back to the watcher? Does Socrates internalize his public method of examination? If so, then the watcher or examiner is the superior, but not exactly as reason, in the *Republic*, is superior in dignity to the passions and appetites that when the soul is not trained, reason constantly battles and often loses to. Socrates does not refer to any special training or higher education, but only to self-examination and the kind of examination by others that may encourage self-examination.

Perhaps in its persistent retrospection, self-examination is similar to interpreting a dream one has: one’s wakeful experience is like a flow of dreams, and only a kind of internal secession from the experiencing self permits one to understand what one was up to or what one has been pursuing without quite knowing why. Implicit is the hope, however, that the inside watcher or examiner is not altogether too much like the amorphous I in the dream that is dreamed along with the rest of the dream. The hope is that the inside examiner is not so entangled with the examined that there is no possibility of genuine distance and difference between these two aspects of the self, no possibility of genuine self-examination. The hope is that self-examination is not a trick of language, an incorrigibly contaminated process, from the start.

Socratic self-examination is not merely self-consciousness; it is not merely reflexive consciousness, the ability to speak sentences about oneself. It is not, at least to begin with, the ability to imagine oneself in the place of another or to imagine what it is like to be another. It is also not quite Thoreau's "doubleness," in which "I can stand as remote from myself as another" thanks to "a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but a spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you."⁴⁹ Socratic self-examination may be one of the seeds, but Thoreau's doubleness is closer, I think, to late Stoicism (though still far from it in important respects).

Whatever Socratic self-examination is, whatever it is most like, and whether or not it is genuinely possible, it is a principal negative component of Socratic integrity and shows, once again, how such integrity is made from negatives. Self-examination can be difficult or painful or disorienting; it is almost unnatural. It surely is not nicely compatible with being splendidly virtuous, which contains nothing tentative or perplexed or self-doubting. It is not useful for self-realization or the display of aristocratic virtues. To become less disposed either to serve as an instrument of injustice or to lend one's strength to the initiation or maintenance of injustice is its ultimate end. The way to greater moderation or sanity is self-examination, joined to examining and being examined by others; the way is not Aristotelian habituation from an early age.

It is obvious that the moral origins of Socratic self-examination do not determine the later history of the practice. Socrates inaugurates thinking about the potentialities of inwardness, but its story in the West contains much diversity. Not all those who have strenuously practiced self-examination or who have theorized its practice are morally motivated, as Socrates is. Inwardness as the site of freedom or self-renewal or positive inspiration is an essential part of the Western fabric, but I do not think that the original conception of inwardness, which is Socratic, contains all these later developments. To say as much is neither to praise nor to reproach Socrates. His conception is what it tremendously is.

Why does Socrates care about injustice to the extent that he does? Why is he so passionate to see less injustice in the world and

disposed to risk death rather than being an instrument of injustice? Why are his moral integrity, and derivatively his intellectual integrity, so intense? There is no conclusive way of answering these questions. I am not even sure that such questions should be asked; indeed, there is a sort of crass impertinence in raising them. Still, the temptation to speculate is hard to put down. The speculation I offer mixes references to Socrates' statements and to his psyche.

One can say simply that for Socrates, human beings, unlike other creatures, are capable of justice and injustice. That is their distinctiveness. Socrates does not know what full distributive justice is; he does not know humanity or any particular human being, even himself, well enough to know how to confer such justice. He does know what injustice is; he knows what undeserved and deliberately inflicted pain or suffering or dispossession is. He knows what people tend to shun or shy away from. He also knows that those who resent injustice when it is done to them are quite prepared to do it to others, whether initially or in retaliation.

From all this, a possible conclusion is that the truly significant aspect of human distinctiveness is the capacity to do injustice. Socrates' aim is to curb it: everyone agrees that certain kinds of pain or suffering or harm are bad. The badness is enough reason to curb it. Then add: to persuade people to be less unjust is not to take them closer to human excellence (one component of which would be the ability to confer full distributive justice), but it is to take in hand a distinctive human capacity—the ability to do injustice—and to transform it into a better expression of human distinctiveness, the ability to refrain from injustice. Such a line of reasoning is suggested by what Socrates says in the *Apology* in regard to the elusive nature of human excellence and the limits on human knowledge concerning it.⁵⁰

One possible reason that Socrates cares (and that we should care) so much about injustice, then, is that the honor of being distinctively human in the most feasible way is at stake. But I do not believe that in thinking about Socrates, we should put too much weight on the idea of human distinctiveness. We may incorporate too much Plato or Aristotle into the Socrates of the *Apology*, even if we highlight the negativity of the manner in which he may conceive of human distinctiveness.

A related reason, present in the *Crito*, is taken up with an eye on eventually introducing the doctrine of nonretaliation. Socrates says that doing injustice is bad for the agent, not only for the victim. The agent harms himself in harming another. This would mean that Socrates has tried to abstain from injustice for his own sake, not that of others, and that he urges the same attitude on others: "For if we do not follow him [the wise man], we shall corrupt and maim that part of us which, we used to say, is improved by justice and disabled by injustice."⁵¹

The *Gorgias* intensifies the idea: it is better for oneself to be the victim of injustice than its perpetrator. But when Socrates in the two episodes must choose between being an instrument (never the initiator) of injustice and risking death, he does not say that he would rather be dead than impaired. Such an interpretation is possible. After all, when Socrates claims in the *Apology*—and it is a shocking statement—that an unexamined life is not worth living, he says something similar. But the choice of an examined over an unexamined (in a sense impaired) life is a choice that can usually be made without risk of death or of any other great loss. Only sluggish people refuse to choose an examined over an unexamined life; their lives are therefore diminished radically and needlessly. Their cowardice is moral, not physical. They choose their impairment amid ease and safety.

I think, however, that the point made by Socrates' conduct in the two episodes is that he will never assist injustice to save himself; he would rather die. Only when the issue is escaping unjust punishment and the city is likened to a parent greater than a biological parent does Socrates say by means of a rhetorical question that it is better to be dead than impaired: "Then is life worth living when that part of us which is maimed by injustice [i.e., by doing injustice] and benefited by justice [i.e., by doing justice] is corrupt?"⁵² The *Crito*, however, as I have said, could be thought closer to the *Gorgias* than to the *Apology*, in which the perspective of the victim's suffering, not the advantage of the agent's soul, is paramount.

To be sure, Socrates does say in the *Apology* that if the Athenians (because of Meletus) put him to death unjustly, Meletus and they would do more harm to themselves than to him (or at least as much harm).⁵³ This probably means, however, that Socrates is

more valuable to Meletus and Athens than life is to Socrates. On the one hand, Socrates is valuable because he is unique in his power to get people to think about why and how their pursuits and policies are making themselves unhappy and harming others; on the other hand, life matters less to him than it does to others. I do not think we can import into this sentence the comparative advantage or disadvantage to the soul of the agent, whether Socrates or the city, of doing and receiving injustice. By his assumption that he is not guilty, Socrates is saying that Athens does not have to choose between doing and receiving injustice, but between doing and not doing injustice.

If we stay with the *Apology* in pursuit of why Socrates is so passionate about injustice and why he prefers dying to being its instrument, we can say that Socrates has an opinion about death that leads him to make lighter of it than most people do. That he was over sixty at the time of the episodes of dissent and noncompliance and that he is seventy when he explains himself under accusation may have some bearing on his readiness to refuse to abet or do injustice to others, cost him what it may. But I doubt it. Xenophon does go so far as to have Socrates say that to die now at the hands of the state would spare him the hardest part of life (old age) and give him the easiest death (quick and painless poisoning).⁵⁴ Perhaps Socrates did put the matter in this way, if only to himself, but the prudence manifested in these words does not suit the Socrates of Plato's *Apology*. There is something tonally different from prudence when toward the end of Plato's *Apology*, he says, "I am persuaded that it was better for me to die now, and to be released from trouble."⁵⁵

Socrates' old age does not really affect his heroism; most elderly people cling to life as ferociously as young ones do. Nevertheless, Socrates thinks about death in such a manner as to leave the impression that he has never cared too much about staying alive for its own sake. He does not love life with a blind attachment; he seems to need reasons to go on living. Perhaps the cause is temperament or some obscure distaste or revulsion. A more worthy reason would be the prevalence of injustice. We shall turn in a moment to a kind of explanation that Socrates himself provides. Whatever the reason, Socrates is continually unintimidated by death and not only when he is risking it in the name of avoiding

injustice. Not dreading death absolutely, however, makes it easier for him to risk his life and then to face certain death with equanimity. This is not to say—Socrates does not say—that it was easy, routine, a smooth matter of course, for him to risk death. He sometimes speaks as if he felt danger, felt fear for himself, when he stood alone.

The *Apology* contains two main and interrelated points concerning death. The first is Socrates' contention that the good person cannot be harmed; the second is Socrates' assertion that either there is no afterlife or if there is one, it can be an opportunity for eternal conversation among the dead. Either hypothesis would help make it easier for Socrates to risk or face death. We leave aside the powerful but metaphysically laden utterances about the philosopher's affinity to death in the *Phaedo*, great as they are. The Socrates of the *Apology* has no positive soul-metaphysics of the sort found in the *Phaedo*.

Concerning harm to the good man, Socrates says: "Meletus and Anytus can do me no harm: that is impossible, for I am sure it is not allowed that a good man be injured by a worse."⁵⁶ He also says, even more unconditionally, that "no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death."⁵⁷ The first contention refers to the harms of (judicially imposed) death, exile, and loss of political status.⁵⁸ The second formulation refers to harm to the good person's affairs in general, but the central harm is (judicially imposed) death.

Although in his speech after conviction and before the penalty, Socrates calls imprisonment an evil and surely considers exile a terrible fate, especially for himself,⁵⁹ he concentrates in these two statements the claim that for himself, death and other judicial penalties—but especially death—are not harms, certainly when inflicted unjustly. Although not harms, they are still not things that Socrates actively seeks or unequivocally wants. He is, after all, a human being and only a human being. He takes pride in having risked his life by dissent and noncompliance, as if he felt the risk as a risk and the possible cost as a cost. Reconciliation to death, even though perhaps present throughout his adult life, is not fully consummated until the eve of his death.

We can distill his claim in this way: in devoting himself as an episodically active citizen, as a general nonparticipant in politics,

and as “a sort of gadfly” to the cause of diminishing injustice and not lending himself as an instrument to its perpetration, he has labored to prevent people, at home and abroad, from being deprived of what is theirs. He has also risked much that is rightfully his in doing so, even though being deprived of what is rightfully his—especially life—does not matter too much to him. That kind of deprivation matters a great deal more to others. A really good person does not attach himself very tightly to even the rudiments of his existence or to his existence itself; a really good person also knows that often those he wants to protect are (or have been or will be) themselves initiators or instruments of evil.

In short, Socrates devotes himself to preserving people, who are not exactly worthy, in possession of those things that are not exactly important, except to their unimproved selves. (The preservation amounts to abstention from unjust taking.) For Socrates to be deprived of life or something else is not really to be harmed, but because people are as they are and because they will more or less likely remain so, despite Socrates’ unstinting efforts, they will feel themselves harmed by such deprivations. Despite their incredible readiness for military self-sacrifice, people ordinarily want to go on living as long as they can and as prosperously as possible. They are within their right to do so. What people rightfully want, Socrates will try not to deny them, even if he himself must lose those things that people rightfully want.

Self-examination has made Socrates more moderate, less intensely attached not only to the prizes of the world but even to the level of day-to-day life that moderate people satisfy themselves with. Perhaps an initial disposition also has moved him in a self-denying direction. Then, too, the divine sign or voice never seems to deter him from risk or self-sacrifice, as if to give its negative blessing to Socrates’ independent resolve to struggle in his own way against injustice. These elements all help detach Socrates from ordinary self-concern, including concern with his death from any cause but particularly his death from the injustice of others.

The question persists, however: why is Socrates, now and before, so calm about death? Why does he mind dying less than most people do, certainly than most people taken as natural individuals not disciplined into martial collective self-forgetful

self-sacrifice? Socrates goes very far when he says, "For no one knows whether death may not be the greatest good that can happen to man" rather than the greatest evil, as most people think.⁶⁰ Why would anyone think, instead, that death may be the greatest good? The rate of suicide is low even among the desperate.

Socrates eventually answers this question when he addresses the jurors who voted to acquit him. The answer, however, seems to violate the heart of the claim that Socrates knows nothing that is worth knowing. His unashamed claim to ignorance has up to this moment rested on the view that the most important power—being able positively to live well—must depend on wisdom, and wisdom is knowledge of what being dead amounts to. He says:

For to fear death, my friends, is only to think ourselves wise without really being wise, for it is to think that we know what we do not know. . . . And if I were to claim to be at all wiser than others, it would be because, not knowing very much about the other world, I do not think I know.⁶¹

His very last words at the trial express total ignorance: "But now the time has come, and we must go away—I to die, and you to live. Which is better is known to the god alone."⁶² One is tempted to say that his search for wisdom all along has been to learn what others think death amounts to and how they adjust their way of life to their thoughts about being dead. Everywhere he turned he found not wisdom in the form of acknowledged ignorance, but ignorance presented as wisdom, with horrible consequences for self and others. Love of life is feverish because the thought of Hades is so appalling. We cannot be wise unless we know what being dead amounts to, and no one living knows that. Hence no one is wise, least of all Socrates, who at least is knowingly ignorant.

The trouble is that Socrates thinks he knows something about death. It is clear that he takes issue with a common view that in Hades souls survive in a condition of longing for life. At least, Socrates in Hades would not long for life. It is also clear that what he tells the jurors who voted for his acquittal comes from no divine source, no oracular priestess, no divine sign or voice and that what he says could not have come from self-examination or

the method of examination used with others. At the end, Socrates, careful to deny that he has speculated about conditions beneath the earth, does just that. Perhaps this speculation has sustained him for a long time in his struggle against injustice. Perhaps his city thought that his aberrance—what we call his integrity—was underlain all along by an unorthodox idea of what being dead amounts to. To that extent, perhaps his old and new accusers were right.

When Socrates says that death is one or another of two states, he does not allow for the possibility of a third. Death is either nothingness or it is a “migration of the soul to another place” where the opportunity presents itself for endless conversation with and examination of the other dead.⁶³ Socrates would want to talk especially with the very types of human being that he, when alive, found especially wanting, poets and men of worldly affairs. The latter possibility is charming because it implies that a lifetime of experience—anyone’s experience—could be the source of an endless duration of interpretation, though it would help if Socrates were on hand as midwife of interpretation. But this latter possibility, an unorthodox version of an orthodox view, does not suit Socrates as one whose intellectual integrity prohibits wishful thinking. However, the notion does suit him as one who, while alive, seems to aspire to be an undistracted, disembodied intellect.

Of course, we can never know for sure what Socrates thought. The first possibility, however, does perfectly suit Socrates’ intellectual integrity. Death is nothingness; it is like not having been born yet; it is not a condition of any sort (personal or otherwise). Gregory Vlastos says: “So far from allowing Socrates a belief in the prenatal existence of the soul, Xenophon does not even credit him with the usual, old-fashioned, belief in the soul’s survival in Hades.”⁶⁴ Xenophon’s omission is not proof of anything, but it is interesting that writings that Xenophon dedicates to the attempt to make Socrates as unthreatening as possible do not declare Socrates’ acceptance of the soul’s immortality.

A supposition that death is nothingness need not sponsor moral integrity; it can as easily go with libertinism or apathy. Socrates’ case is different. He finds the prospect of nothingness appealing, not disgusting or disturbing. He does not repeat the

saying of Silenus that it is best never to have been born, but he comes close. He says:

if death is the absence of all consciousness, and like the sleep of one whose slumbers are unbroken by any dreams, it will be a wonderful gain. For if a man had to select that night in which he slept so soundly that he did not even dream, and had to compare with it all the other nights and days of his life, and then had to say how many days and nights in his life he had spent better and more pleasantly than this night, I think that a private person, nay, even the Great King of Persia himself, would find them easy to count, compared with the others. If that is the nature of death, I for one count it a gain. For then it appears that all time is nothing more than a single night.⁶⁵

Only a few days and nights in one's life are sweeter than dreamless sleep or the nothingness of death, and they do not weigh as much as the other days and nights.⁶⁶ Being dead forever is nothing more for the dead person than a single night's dreamless sleep is for a living one. To risk or face death may be a little easier for a person who not only thinks that death is nothingness but also believes that life is a burden.

Surmising about death as Socrates does, why has he gone on living in the absolutely arduous way he has? Why didn't he lead a more ordinary life or a moderately pleasurable one? The answer can be, finally, that he could not help living as he did. I mean that he was driven irresistibly and from the beginning, from before the time the priestess gave her answer, which in any case Socrates did not have to construe in the activist way he did. Driven by what? By the one positivity that perhaps can be attributed to him: that he was driven by affection and compassion for others. Indeed, all Socrates' negativity stems from that one positivity and is dictated by it. It is his energy, his eros. He is more than just the friend of the Athenian jurors that he says he is.⁶⁷ The whole image of Socrates as a model of intellectual and moral integrity, as a supreme hero of self-denial and self-sacrifice, as a master of negativity, needs one, if only one, positivity, and that must be a positive commitment to others. He cared for them more than he cared for himself. He lived and died for them. He made them his superiors by deeming them worthy of his self-sacrifice. But he did

not think that they were his equals, and this is precisely why he had to care for them and in the way that he did.

NOTES

1. Page 37a. All page number references are the standard margin pages of Plato's works and refer to the dialogue being discussed. I used the translation of the *Apology* and the *Crito* by F. J. Church, revised by Robert D. Cummings (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956). I also regularly consulted the translation by G. M. A. Grube, *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981); and read the translations by Benjamin Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato* (New York: Random House, 1937), vol. 1, 401–38; Hugh Tredennick, *The Last Days of Socrates* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1959); and R. E. Allen, *The Dialogues of Plato* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), vol. 1.

In thinking about the *Apology* and the *Crito*, I found instructive and helpful the following works: Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," *Social Research* 38 (1971): 417–46; Hannah Arendt, *Thinking*, vol. 1 of her *The Life of the Mind*, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978); Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57 (1990): 73–103; Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Socrates on Trial* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989); W. K. C. Guthrie, *Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); Richard Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984); Alexander Nehamas, "What Did Socrates Teach and to Whom Did He Teach It?" *Review of Metaphysics* 46 (1992): 279–306; Josiah Ober, "Gadfly Ethics in Context: The 'Socrates and Athens' Problem in *Apology* and *Crito*," unpublished manuscript; Christopher Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989); Gerasimos Xenophon Santas, *Socrates: Philosophy in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979); Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); and A. D. Woozley, *Law and Obedience: The Arguments of Plato's Crito* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979). I have also learned greatly from my students at Amherst and Princeton, where I have been privileged to teach the *Apology* and the *Crito* over a period of forty years. My special thanks to Neera Badhwar, J. Peter Euben, Donald R. Morrison, and Alexander Nehamas for their criticisms and suggestions, and to John Cooper for many enlivening discussions of Socrates.

2. 37a.

3. 31c.
4. 17d.
5. 31d-32a.
6. 32e-33a.
7. 32a-c.
8. 32c-e.
9. 28e.
10. 28b-29a.
11. 40a-b.
12. 21a.
13. 29d.
14. Diogenes Laertius, "Socrates," in R. D. Hicks, trans., *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), vol. 1, II: 31, 161.
15. 32e.
16. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, III: 41-48.
17. Ibid., III: 49-50.
18. 32b.
19. 49c.
20. 28516b-c.
21. 54d.
22. 36a.
23. 54b-c.
24. 49c-e.
25. 54b-c.
26. 51a.
27. 50b.
28. 51a-b.
29. 51d-e.
30. 51e-52a.
31. 30e.
32. 19b.
33. 24b.
34. 20a-b.
35. 22a.
36. 29c-d.
37. 30b-c.
38. 31a-b.
39. 39c-d.
40. 38a.
41. 164-65.
42. Diogenes Laertius, "Socrates," vol. 1, II: 25, 155.

43. 31c.

44. 29a.

45. 17a.

46. 230a.

47. Diogenes Laertius, "Antisthenes," in Hicks, trans., *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 2, VI: 6, 9.

48. See note 1 for citations of Arendt. Arendt makes much of a passage in the *Gorgias*, in which Socrates says: "It would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that my single self should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me" (482b–c). See *Plato's Gorgias*, trans. W. C. Helmbold (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1952), 50.

According to Arendt, Socrates' regular practice of self-examination is entwined with his dread of the self-reproach that wrongdoing would cause him: he stays blameless so that he can be internally harmonious. But I doubt the Socrates of the *Apology* believes that he can ever attain steady internal harmony, perfect freedom from self-reproach. Furthermore, Arendt assimilates self-examination too closely to conscience; she makes it too directly moral.

See also Bonnie Honig's thoughtful essay on integrity and self-division, "Difference, Dilemmas, and the Politics of Home," *Social Research* 61 (1994): 563–97.

49. Henry David Thoreau, "Solitude," in *Walden* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), 122.

50. 20a–b.

51. 47d.

52. 47e.

53. 30c, d.

54. Xenophon, *Recollections of Socrates and Socrates' Defense before the Jury*, trans. Anna S. Benjamin (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 6–9, 146.

55. 41d.

56. 30c–d.

57. 41c–d.

58. 30d.

59. 37b–e.

60. 29a.

61. 29a–b.

62. 42a.

63. 40c–41c.

64. Vlastos, *Socrates*, 103.

65. 40c–e.

66. Why are most dreams bad dreams, and why are bad dreams continuous with most wakeful life? The Socrates of the *Republic* suggests that the reason is that dreams, like daily life, are the scene of temptation to wrongdoing. He says: “Our dreams make it clear that there is a dangerous, wild, and lawless form of desire in everyone, even in those of us who seem to be entirely moderate or measured” (572b). See Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 242. Temptation makes life as well as dreams a burden to one whose sense of injustice is keen. There may be a connection to the Socrates of the *Apology*.

67. 29d.