

interpretation

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Discussion

Defending Socrates and Defending Politics: A Response to Stewart Umphrey

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Rarely is one's published writing treated with the care that Stewart Umphrey brings to his reading of my *Plato's Defense of Socrates* in his essay "Erōs and Thumos."¹ It can certainly be said of Umphrey's learned and spirited critique, as I trust will also be said of my response, that ours is no merely personal exchange, but rather one that addresses the principal question facing philosophers and political men—indeed, all human beings. As it was for Plato, so today the proper appreciation of Socrates' fate may afford the best entry into the question of how one ought to live.

Because Umphrey's review provoked a rethinking of the content and purpose of my book, the present response is no mere rehearsal of old arguments. In defending what I said there, I have found myself obliged to deepen (though not to change) my critique and defense of Socrates. Moreover, I have had to make explicit why that critique and defense were appropriate in light of the contemporary crisis of the West.

Umphrey's review presents itself as a defense of Socrates against my alleged condemnation of Socrates. By defending Socrates, Umphrey seeks to defend philosophy, which, in his opinion, I am inadvertently attacking in my defense of the justice of Athens' condemnation of the philosopher. On the contrary, I maintain that the greatest enemy of philosophy today is not politics but the view that there is no essential conflict between philosophy and political life—the very view which Umphrey seems compelled to uphold in his defense of Socrates. This view appears today in two versions. The most radical version is historicism or nihilism, according to which philosophy as quest for the truth about man and the world is impossible. Therefore philosophy, being as arbitrary and groundless at its root as any historically conditioned political ideology, does not differ in principle from the opinions at the base of every political community. The more typical version of the current view holds that Plato's cave,

1. "Erōs and Thumos," *Interpretation* 10 (May & Sept. 1982), 353–422. Pp. 354–382 address David Bolotin's *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship: An Interpretation of the "Lysis," with a New Translation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979); pp. 382–422 address my essay *Plato's Defense of Socrates*, in *Plato's "Apology of Socrates": An Interpretation, with a New Translation* (Cornell University Press, 1979). Umphrey studied with Seth Benardete at the New School for Social Research; I studied with Harry V. Jaffa in Claremont.

being open to the light, can be enlightened.² The illusion of easy escape from the cave, the illusion of Enlightenment, certainly remains a dominant feature of the West today. As a consequence of this view we live, according to an image of Leo Strauss, in a pit beneath the cave, from which we must ascend in the first instance not to the sunlight but to the pre-Enlightenment cave in which politics and philosophy come to sight as enemies.³ It must be seen that the typical assumption that they are easily made compatible leads in fact to an evisceration of the political. What is needed today, then, is not in the first instance a defense of Socrates but rather a defense of the dignity and authority of political life. By maintaining that Socrates is innocent of the charge brought against him by Athens, Umphrey wittingly or unwittingly contributes to the prevailing liberal prejudice.

I. SOCRATES WAS GUILTY

Let us examine Umphrey's defense of Socrates. We will focus on what I take to be the two leading points of his argument. First, Umphrey maintains that Socrates is innocent because I have not proven him guilty according to Athenian law. He says that I should have investigated the historical evidence for laws against impiety in ancient Athens (391–392). But in fact there was no need for me to conduct such an investigation because the existence of such laws was never questioned during the trial. No one, least of all Socrates, ever suggests that impiety and corruption of the young are not illegal. Besides, later in his review Umphrey even mentions evidence external to the *Apology of Socrates* that impiety was against the law (419). Umphrey himself concedes that this part of his defense of Socrates is unconvincing (392).

The second point of his defense involves a broad comparison of Socrates' speeches and way of life with the convictions and traditions of Athens. He sees no real conflict between the two. I will speak to three of his chief contentions.

(a) Umphrey asserts that "West misconceives Socratic irony by overestimating the openness or publicity of Socratic philosophy" (395). I agree with Umphrey that one must distinguish Socrates' own activity from "the public *praxis* in which it occurs." But it is precisely Socrates' "public *praxis*" that is at issue here. Was not Socrates famous for publicly contradicting generally accepted opinions about "the greatest things," including the traditional stories about the gods? (*Apology* 21c–23b, *Republic* 377b–383c, *Euthyphro* 6a). Did not Socrates corrupt the young Lysis, as is demonstrated by Umphrey himself

2. It is true that Plato's cave is open to the light (*Republic* 514a), but the whole city literally turns its back on that light and denies that it is there at all. Umphrey overstates the cave's openness and understates its closedness (p. 398). Citations in the text will be to Umphrey's review.

3. *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1952), pp. 154–158.

in his discussion of Bolotin's book?⁴ Reading Umphrey, one sometimes wonders how the trial for impiety and corruption of the young could ever have taken place. One is reminded of Walter Berns's Socrates, who politely "went down into the cave to learn from the various imperfect opinions of men" and who "lived quietly with his fellow Athenians while hardly letting them know he philosophized."⁵ This sounds more like a cautious junior professor on his way to tenure than the defiant challenger of Calicles, Anytus, and Meletus (*Gorgias, Meno, Apology of Socrates*). To be sure, Socrates did not blurt out his private opinions to just anyone at any time; I went to considerable lengths to show Socrates' circumspection in my account of the *Apology of Socrates*. But he did reveal quite a lot, and that provided the legitimate occasion for his indictment and condemnation. The least that one would have to say is that Socrates' secrecy measures seem to have been defective.⁶

Socrates' philosophic quest for knowledge of "the greatest things" necessarily comes up against the authoritative opinions of the Athenian tradition. Those opinions prove under Socrates' examination to be boastful claims to knowledge where there is no knowledge. So Socrates cannot accept those opinions. Such opinions concern not only morality but especially the gods of the city. Therefore Socrates did not believe in the gods in which the city believed. Moreover, by conducting his arguments in public, in the presence of young people, he corrupted the young in the sense that the city understood corruption.

(b) Umphrey denies that orthodoxy, the holding of correct opinions, is as important to religious "belief" (νομίζειν) as I think it is. The law is much more concerned with right action than right thought. "Civic religion consists . . . less in holding certain things to be the case—for example, that Zeus exists and cares—than in performance of certain practices (νομιζόμενα)—for example, making and keeping oaths" (396). Even if Umphrey's argument is correct, it misses the point. Orthodoxy is the foundation of orthopraxy. Fear of punishment is no sufficient guarantor of right conduct; what is especially needed are deeply held convictions about the just and unjust, good and bad, noble and shameful. Although Umphrey does not deny the need for such convictions, his argument tempts the reader to think they are superfluous. He leaves one with the impression that he is a follower of the political theory of modern liberalism, which did indeed attempt to discover a new basis for political life

4. Trying to defend Socrates from the charge of corrupting Lysis. Umphrey concludes that "These defenses are admirable even if not entirely successful" and that Socrates' investigation in common with Lysis and the others is "communal dynamite" (380).

5. Walter Berns, "A Reply to Harry Jaffa," *National Review*, January 22, 1982, p. 45 (responding to Jaffa's "In Defense of Political Philosophy: A Letter to Walter Berns," pp. 36–44 of the same journal). This Jaffa–Berns exchange bears directly upon the principal question at issue between Umphrey and me.

6. A point noted by Aristophanes in the *Clouds*: see Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), p. 14.

according to which private opinion could be left alone. It is doubtful, however, whether modern liberalism has succeeded in a single instance in providing the foundation for an enduring political order, for a regime that remains indifferent to the moral convictions of its citizens is one that invites self-contempt and eventual self-destruction: Weimar Germany, for example. The United States is certainly not a liberal regime of this sort, as is shown above all by the speeches and career of Lincoln. A liberal regime whose citizens hold opinions indifferent or hostile to free government cannot last. All the more important are the moral opinions of the citizens of other, nonliberal polities. For these reasons the Athenians were rightly concerned about Socrates' opinions regarding the gods, and so his habitual performance of prescribed religious duties was hardly enough to establish his piety.

(c) Umphrey employs an esoteric interpretation of Greek poetry to rationalize the Greek gods and thereby to make them compatible with Socratic inquiry. As poetic analysis his account is perhaps plausible if not completely convincing. But as an account of the self-understanding of Athenian civic theology it is far off the mark. For if "the 'cosmos' of Ideas according to Plato is not dissimilar to the pantheon according to Homer" (397)—an astounding enough claim in itself—then these beautiful, remote gods of Homer are only nominally the same as the avenging gods of Athens, who affirm the authority of the laws and the sanctity of the family. On behalf of these gods the Athenians engaged in a frenzy of murderous recriminations against guilty and innocent alike following the mutilation of the Hermes-statues during the war with Sparta (Thucydides VI). And the Athenians condemned the ten generals who did not pick up the dead bodies from the naval battle partly because they were thought to have violated the sacred burial laws.⁷ Because Umphrey underrates the degree to which Athens was rooted in the ancestral (397), he also underrates the degree to which their gods were understood as defenders of ancestral tradition and of the sacredness of "one's own." Umphrey conflates the readily accessible with the remote and implicit teachings of Greek poetry in the same way as he accuses me of conflating the exoteric and esoteric teachings of Socrates. But the poets were generally thought to speak the truth about the gods (*Euthyphro* 6a–b), while Socrates was generally believed to deny the city's gods (*Apology* 18b–c).

We may summarize Umphrey's defense of Socrates as follows: (a) Socrates keeps his true, subversive thoughts hidden, so there is no conflict between Socrates and the city; (b) since private convictions are barely relevant to law-abidingness, we should hesitate to conclude on the basis of his opinions alone that Socrates was guilty of impiety; (c) besides, the citizens' opinions are really protophilosophic, more or less open to a rational account of the whole, like Greek poetry.

7. *Apology of Socrates* 32b–c and my note to that passage.

One might wonder why Umphrey bothers to argue that Socrates concealed his thought if there is no conflict between that thought and the city. Likewise, we could continue our examination of other, less important aspects of Umphrey's defense. More to the point, we could be led to ask what significance could possibly attach to the trial of Socrates if Umphrey is right in his contention that Socrates did not make public his thoughts, thoughts seemingly harmless in any event. Was the trial, then, merely the ganging-up of some democratic politicians on a former friend of Critias and Alcibiades, those former enemies of the Athenian democracy? From the point of view of philosophy—the core of Socrates' life—was the trial only a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing?

But it would be pointless to pursue these questions. For Umphrey lets us know that he does not believe his own arguments. He prefaces his defense of Socrates with this surprising admission: "One can say of [West's] book what Hobbes said of Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*: it disseminates the truth with bold candor" (388). More particularly, Umphrey all but concedes in the fifth and final section of his review that Socrates was indeed guilty of violating the city's laws both in the narrow and in the larger sense. The conflict between Socrates and Athens was fundamental. There *was* a law against what Socrates was doing, and Socrates' activity *did* cause disrespect for authority within the city (419).

Why then does Umphrey pretend to disagree indignantly with me about Socrates' guilt when he really agrees? The answer is that Umphrey wants to defend philosophy against what he regards as its principal enemy: the waspish, spirited pretentiousness of the political. "From the standpoint of the philosopher, [the conflict between Socrates and Athens] is a conflict between *erōs* and *thumos*, between human wisdom and very great stupidity or sophistry" (417). Umphrey's whole essay, which is entitled "*Erōs and Thumos*," may be read as a sustained attack on *thumos* (spiritedness) and on politics in the name of philosophy. In the first half of his essay, in which he reviews Bolotin's book on friendship, Umphrey presents an extended analysis and critique of friendship. He takes friendship to be founded on spiritedness, on the ground that friendship and spiritedness remain satisfied with being oneself and being at home with one's own (family, friends, and city) without concern for aspiring to and acquiring the good (see especially 378–379). The latter concern, characteristic of philosophy, belongs according to Umphrey to the province of *eros*. Plato's portrayal of the trial gives us a picture of embodied *Eros* (Socrates) in elemental conflict with embodied *Thumos* (Athens). Umphrey defends the erotic Socrates, then, against the spirited attack of West and Athens. Socrates may be guilty of breaking the law, but Athens and West are guilty of being enemies of philosophy and hence of the erotic pursuit of the good.⁸

8. Umphrey amuses his readers by suggesting that his defense of Socrates is at the same time an urgently needed defense of me, for since I am a "Socratic philosopher," my "explicit condemna-

Evidently Umphrey directs his spirited indignation (392) against me not because he is convinced of Socrates' innocence but rather in order to reprimand me for letting the cat out of the bag. Umphrey would prefer to conceal the truth about Socrates in order to defend his own "friend," philosophy. There is precedent for this procedure: Plato wrote the *Apology of Socrates* as a defense of Socrates while showing "between the lines" the deficiency of Socrates. But ancient Athens is not modern America. Athens was a city in which philosophy as a way of life known to the city was quite new. There was no public prejudice in its favor, and much against. In America today people are accustomed to defer to the claims of science and rational inquiry. Philosophy is publicly respectable. A common dogma holds that open-mindedness is one of the highest virtues. Spiritedness in its political manifestations, on the other hand, has fallen into disrepute. War and imperialism are out of fashion. Patriotism makes people uncomfortable. The notion that the country is threatened by Communist enemies is derided. Nixon's spirited partisanship was roundly hated; much more acceptable is Reagan's easygoing nice-fellow manner. Serious religious conviction is an embarrassment, particularly among teachers and journalists, who in turn are encouraging young people and older citizens to feel the same way. It is considered illiberal to express concern over the decline of traditional morality. In short, all those things which, according to Socrates and the ancients, are essential to healthy political life, are today under attack. Yet Umphrey thinks, as I judge from the way he wrote his review, that the most urgent duty of the philosopher today is to attack spiritedness and the political.

The practical problem of our time is the victory of the modern liberal critique of politics, a critique which maintains that one can and ought to do away with the intrusions of spiritedness into public life. An enlightened, sophisticated citizenry can supposedly live together peacefully without any public concern with morality, religion, hatred of enemies, or any other of the lingering relics of the Dark Ages. Such superstitions are to be relegated to the arena of private life, and there they will gradually be rendered harmless by the spreading doctrine that there is no matter of right and wrong important enough to fight over to the death. The Last Man will live in John Rawls's bureaucratic utopia in perfect contentment.

Of course, political life did not transform itself in the hoped-for manner. The promises of liberalism proved to be empty. Instead of the apolitical, purely administrative politics of a new age of civilization and peace, we in the twenti-

tion of Socrates is implicitly a condemnation of [myself]" (388). More likely to get me into trouble in the contemporary world of liberal academia is my forthright, "conservative" defense of the political. Consider the case of Willmoore Kendall, a predecessor of mine at the University of Dallas, who was hardly beloved for his defense of Athens against Socrates. See "The People versus Socrates Revisited," in *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1971).

On spiritedness as *the* characteristic of the political, see also Umphrey's useful essay "On the Theme of Plato's *Laches*," *Interpretation* 6 (Fall 1976), 1-10.

eth century find ourselves subjected to a politics of bestiality—in Communism and Nazism bestial beyond the wildest dreams of tyrants of earlier ages. War and partisan contention become far more terrible than ever before because the parties of modernity compete in a common apocalyptic mission: to rid the world once and for all of the remnants of illiberalism, of spiritedness. Blind to the political character of its crusade against politics and traditional morality, modern liberalism threatens not only the survival of a civilized West but the survival of philosophy itself.

This, then, is why I attacked Socrates in my book: not because I am anti-philosophic, but because I wanted to defend against liberalism the dignity of spiritedness and of political life. From a certain point of view I am even executing Umphrey's project more faithfully than he does himself: if spiritedness causes one to be content with one's own and eros leads one away from it, then the eros that turns away from one's own calls in the first instance for a spirited critique of Socrates (who is viewed as apolitical and hence self-evidently good, according to current dogma) and a spirited defense of politics. Umphrey and I agree, I trust, that philosophy is in danger and ought to be protected. We disagree about where the current danger to philosophy is strongest. He sees it in politics, I infer, while I see it in the pseudo-philosophical opinion that views politics and the conditions of political life with indifference or sovereign contempt.

There is more hatred of what Socrates stands for beneath the easygoing praise accorded him by our liberal age than in my sympathetic critique of him. It is necessary to understand and face up to Socrates' guilt in its full scope before attempting to transcend the realm of conventional opinion by philosophizing. Indeed, except in the rarest cases, such "transcendence" is nothing more than an exchange of one convention (that of the political community) for another (that of a philosophic sect or of the "Republic of Letters").

II. SOCRATES' WAY OF LIFE

But what is philosophy? Umphrey seeks not merely to defend Socrates, but also to understand him. He devotes the central section of his review of my book (402–412) to the question of Socrates' "thing," his *pragma*, which, as he says at the outset, is really the main theme of his whole essay (354). Umphrey accepts much of the argument that I developed in *Plato's Defense of Socrates*, especially concerning the incomplete, questioning character of Socrates' "human wisdom." Umphrey and I agree that Socrates "must remain radically Odyssean, wandering (or falling) between goal and starting point, wisdom and ignorance, virtue and one's own, mind (or soul) and body (or city)" (405). But Umphrey disagrees with my estimate (which is shared according to him by Leo Strauss [405]), that Socrates' way of life makes sense. Umphrey believes it is *alogon*,

nonrational, for “human wisdom is suppositionless.” It “provides insufficient purchase for *any* inquiry. Yet Socrates inquires like *crazy*” (409, emphasis added): “there is madness in his *methodos*.” Umphrey even purports to discover “the religious dimension in his thinking” in Socrates’ allegedly unquestioning deference to his nonrational daimonic voice: “To the extent he is guided by it, he operates mindlessly.” In light of all this, Umphrey cannot understand why “Socrates remains outwardly resolute and serene. This is but one appearance of a problem which I, for one, am unable to resolve: By virtue of what does Socrates, or anyone else, keep his head in *aporia* [perplexity]?” (410).

One is certainly surprised to encounter this disparagement of Socratic philosophizing after Umphrey has gone to such length to defend Socrates. It appears that Umphrey is a sort of Don Quixote: the noble knight battles the supposed enemy of beautiful Philosophia, yet West is no enemy to his lady, who, alas, turns out, like Dulcinea, to be no fair lady at all but merely a “beautiful illusion” (412). But in fact, Umphrey’s essay as a whole goes well beyond Quixotism. For after exploding the pretensions of spiritedness (and therefore of political life generally) in the name of eros in his review of Bolotin, he proceeds to explode the pretensions of eros (and therefore of philosophy) in his review of West. Umphrey is no Don Quixote, but rather a universal pulverizer. After the dust clears, we seem to be left with nothing. How are we to understand this strange turn of events?

In the *Apology*, Socrates gradually unveils his true self in the course of his speeches to the jury. Umphrey provides a useful and sympathetic summary of my somewhat complicated explanation of this unveiling (403–405). There is no need here to go over this ground again. For the main point of Umphrey’s diagnosis and rejection of Socratic philosophy and of my defense of Socratic philosophy is this: Socrates’ “human wisdom” (*Apology* 20d), limited as it is to knowledge of one’s ignorance of “the greatest things” (22d), cannot provide knowledge that the philosophic life of conversational inquiry is worth living. It is not Socrates’ practice but his theory that is boastful or pretentious (410). Therefore Socrates’ affirmation and choice of his way of life is irrational at its root. Nor does Umphrey shy away from the terrible implication of his argument. In the end, he suspects, “one cannot know the whole and be whole” (411). In other words, knowledge and happiness are incompatible. It must be understood that this is not an incidental point made by Umphrey in passing. For he conceives this opposition between knowledge and happiness as an expression of the opposition within the soul of eros and thumos. Love, which strives ultimately for wisdom, and spiritedness, which repels everything that threatens one’s own preservation and one’s being comfortably at home with oneself, are implacable enemies. For since love takes one outside of oneself, alienating one from oneself in the quest for knowledge, spiritedness opposes love on behalf of man’s “natural,” self-complacent, self-ignorant wholeness. There can be no peace, but only war more or less concealed, between such opposite contenders

for sovereignty in the soul. The supposition that the erotic quest for wisdom can restore man's natural, thumotic wholeness—that the goal of eros and thumos is one—is false. So insofar as Socrates holds that the life of philosophy is the greatest good for a human being, he is probably succumbing to “a beautiful illusion without which our life would appear unlivable” (412).

We are familiar with Umphrey's position. Let us not hesitate to call it by its true name: nihilism. Umphrey rejects Socratism, then, because he is a nihilist. So let us address the point in question: is Socrates' human wisdom a sufficient foundation for a rational life? We may begin from the fact that knowledge of one's ignorance about the greatest things is not ignorance altogether. Such knowledge implies that one knows what the greatest things are, that is, what the most important problems or questions are. One knows this by a reflection on one's human condition: one is alive, one's way of life is a matter of choice, and that choice is urgent and inexorable. How to live, or, in a typical Socratic formulation, “What is virtue?” comes to sight as life's primary question. But how is this question to be answered? Since people hold different opinions about it, Socrates examines their opinions by conversing with them. He quickly discovers that those opinions are incoherent. So he tries his own hand at thinking out in conversation with others the question of how to live. As he pursues this inquiry, he finds that it is long, arduous, and apparently inconclusive—though always pleasant. He does make some progress in clarifying and deepening his understanding of the problem. He even derives a certain satisfaction from his awareness of this progress. But he acquires no final answers. In spite of that fact, or because of it, he finds himself in possession of a tentative answer to his question: the best life is the life of inquiry. Of course Socrates cannot be absolutely certain that this is the best life; as long as the inquiry remains incomplete, his serenity will be tempered by a sober recognition that against all likelihood his whole life could be a mistake.

We may consider the *Republic* as exemplary of Socrates' procedure. Confronted at the beginning with Cephalus' paternal authority and, behind it, the authority of “divine revelation,” Socrates points out to Cephalus an apparent contradiction in its prescription. Instead of continuing the discussion, Cephalus abruptly departs, laughing. Is his laughter a sign of genuine superiority to Socrates' paltry *logos*? Or is it only a more or less conscious cover for his inability to respond sensibly to Socrates' question? For almost all practical purposes Socrates must assume that the latter is the correct explanation, or else he would be left in helpless perplexity and the conversation could not reasonably continue. Still, he cannot *know* that this is the case. Maybe against all odds, and against the evidence of Cephalus' character (which comes to sight as defective), Cephalus' authoritative, poetic, “revealed” wisdom *is* the way to truth. The memory of Cephalus' brief appearance and exit, then, hangs over the subsequent discussion like a looming question mark. But that does not intimidate Socrates—far from it. He inquires, not “like crazy,” as Umphrey asserts.

but soberly, tentatively assuming that the opinions of himself and his interlocutors contain divinations, or partial glimpses, of the truth they are seeking, and that the refinement and enlargement of those opinions will bring them closer to the idea of justice. And that is exactly what seems to happen. For although the conversation reported in the *Republic* fails to provide a simple, unambiguous definition of justice, it does succeed in showing forth the full scope of the problem of justice. It does so, in brief, by showing that whenever we speak of justice we have two different things in mind: complete dedication to the common good of one's own community, and perfection of one's own soul. If we take the *Republic* as a whole, including the Cephalus episode, we may even say that the *Republic* itself, as it is read and thought through by the reader, *is* the idea of justice. Through it we see what justice is, how the problem of justice reveals itself in all its aspects. Is that achievement knowledge or ignorance? It cannot be knowledge strictly speaking, because of the necessary reservations we have mentioned. But it is more than ignorance. And so, by virtue of his resourcefulness (*euporia*) in inquiry, Socrates is able to "keep his head in *aporia* [perplexity]" (410) when others are overwhelmed and dumbfounded by the prospect of indefinite prolongation of the argument. For some Socrates may be only a torpedo-fish who stuns them into lethargy, but for others he is a gadfly who awakens and prepares them to think.⁹

III. SOCRATES, CLASSICAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY, AND MODERNITY

Umphrey's verdict, in sum, is that "while the difference between his [Socrates'] philosophizing and his human wisdom is greater than West makes it seem, the pretentiousness of Socrates' practice is less than West makes it seem" (410). My contention, of course, is just the opposite: while Socrates' philosophizing is nothing more than the continual exercise of his human wisdom, his practice, his patent and persistent challenge to the foundations of Athenian morality and piety, is political dynamite. We have seen that Umphrey secretly agrees with me concerning Socrates' guilt; but I do not concur secretly or openly with Umphrey's nihilistic disparagement of the Socratic enterprise.

At the foundation of modern liberalism lies the conviction that there is noth-

9. He has the former effect on Meno (*Meno* 80a–b) and Critias (*Charmides* 169c), for example.

The whole of the present essay, but especially the section just concluded, also responds to two other intelligent critics, both of whom objected to the absence of a thematic discussion of Socrates' "human wisdom" in my book: David L. Levine's review appeared in *Philosophical Topics* 12 (Spring 1981), 261–265; Michael Davis' in *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 3 (1979), 151–152.

The quotation from Umphrey in the next sentence is taken from his typescript. There appears to be an omission in the printed version on p. 410.

ing serious at stake in the quarrels of political life and that philosophy as the quest for the Right and the Good is impossible.¹⁰ Umphrey's account of Plato appears to agree, for according to Umphrey political life is founded on an illusion, and Socratic philosophy is "madness" (410). One might have expected an assiduous student of the classics like Umphrey to enlist as an ally in my effort to counteract the reigning liberal prejudices of our day. Instead, he does not seem to mind placing the Socratic-Platonic citadel at the disposal of the forces of modernity. Is it not more fitting to defend Socratic philosophy *and* civic piety against the liberal trivialization of both?

Socrates and Athens—philosophy and politics—both agree that knowing and doing what is right matters more than anything else in life, while modern liberalism denigrates both by denying publicly that the question of what is right is answerable. We have all grown up with these opinions, and we are infected by them. The political cowardice of the West, as well as the virtual collapse of political philosophy since Nietzsche, may both be traced to the victory of such opinions. For if life is meaningless at its heart, then there is no point either in defending oneself or in thinking for oneself. It is gradually dawning on people that the victory of modernity means not the joyful liberation of man from the last remaining chains of the Dark Ages, but rather the utter disappearance of significance from human life.

If an ideological liberalism which reduces to nihilism is the current view, and if, as I think, this view ought to be attacked for the sake of the life of inquiry as well as for the sake of morality, then we should not be told to look down on political concerns, but rather to pay them a due respect. We are less in need of reminders of the deficiency of political morality than of lessons in its nobility and strength. We do not need to hear that classical natural right gives little or no guidance to political life, but rather that natural right is the indispensable foundation of sound politics.

It was this concern—and not any gratuitous "taste for manliness and subtle thought," as Umphrey seems to think (421)—that moved me to try to understand the peculiar way in which Plato portrays Socrates in the *Apology of Socrates* and elsewhere. Sometimes Umphrey seems unaware of this concern of mine (for example, 392, n. 50); at other times he dismisses what I had to say about it rather rudely (420–421); elsewhere Umphrey presents in his own name a view about the relationship of Plato and Socrates that concurs with my own (395, 399). Since Umphrey seems not to have grasped my intention in this matter, I will state more clearly what I understand to be the difference between Plato and Socrates, for this is one of the most distinctive features of *Plato's Defense of Socrates*.

Plato wrote the *Apology of Socrates* in such a way that the surface impression of Socrates' innocence contradicts the true teaching of the work, Socrates'

10. See, for example, Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, II.21 ("Of the Idea of Power").

guilt. Plato proceeded in this way not because he wished to denigrate political life but rather to lay the foundation for a new political morality. Plato fashioned from Socrates a new hero in a new, post-Homeric “poetry” in order to provide the best of the Greek youth with a standard by which politics could be measured and ordered. In reading Plato it is necessary to contrast Socrates as he appears to the characters within the dialogues with Socrates as he appears to us, the readers. To the jury before whom he speaks, Socrates is an ugly, offensive old man who annoys the citizens and threatens the city. To readers of Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*, Socrates is a noble truth-seeker wrongfully condemned to death by ignorance and villainy. Plato rejuvenates and ennobles Socrates (*Second Letter* 314c) by blunting his harsh edges, his persistent questioning of conventional opinions. The Platonic Socrates comes to sight for us as a defender of morality and political responsibility.¹¹

For example, it is characteristic of Plato that he (and not Socrates) should bring into the light of day the reverential, almost patriotic speeches of Socrates in the *Crito*, a most private dialogue conducted secretly in prison in the dark, where it otherwise would have remained. For the *Crito* is a “performed” dialogue, that is, one that Plato reports directly to his readers; it is not narrated by Socrates or anyone else. When it is read together with the *Apology of Socrates*, the *Crito* mitigates for Plato’s readers the lingering effects of Socrates’ defiance of Athens in his defense speech. In the same spirit as my remarks here, Alfarabi goes so far as to say that the *Crito* is the *Apology of Socrates*—that is, Socrates’ real defense speech is the *Crito*, not the speech he delivered at the trial, which Alfarabi appropriately renames the *Protest of Socrates against the Athenians*.¹²

The key to Plato’s transformation of Socrates into a figure of impeccable moral and political credentials is to be found in the new image of philosophy put forward in the dialogues. The philosophic life, which might seem to be the enemy of morality because of its uncompromising insistence on knowledge as the only acceptable basis for thought and action, is painted in beautiful tones by Plato in his portrait of Socrates as hero, so that philosophy itself takes on the color of morality.¹³ Philosophy becomes an object of respect and love in the pious eyes of spirited lovers of the noble. Philosophy becomes as it were the peak of moral virtue, including in its sweep all or most of the demands of morality in the traditional understanding.

Plato proceeded as he did because of the danger to sound politics, as well as to philosophy, that arises when philosophic inquiry is conducted openly and

11. Umphrey, p. 395, mentions that “*Plato’s* Socrates comes to sight as a moral man” (my emphasis). But he does not notice or rather admit that the way Socrates comes to sight to Plato’s readers is not the way he comes to sight to the citizens of Athens.

12. Alfarabi’s *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 63.

13. West, *Plato’s Defense of Socrates*, pp. 220–221.

continuously in any society. For all societies, even modern liberal societies, exist in the element of opinion. The bond that holds them together is the shared convictions about the things that truly matter, the things about which one dares not make jokes in public. Undiluted Socratic philosophy is dynamite for civil society:¹⁴ it explodes these convictions by throwing them and everything else into question—everything except the rightness of the philosophic life itself. From the jury that was about to vote on his condemnation to death, Socrates demanded public recognition of the philosopher as the city's greatest benefactor. (According to Alfarabi, Plato corrected his predecessor Socrates on this point by omitting any provision for exalting the philosophers in the city, as opposed to exalting the "virtuous" and the "princes."¹⁵) But the philosopher cannot be recognized as the greatest benefactor without undermining the moral conditions of political life and of philosophy itself. Here is the larger ground of Socrates' guilt. The public expression of his philosophizing endangers philosophy, the best way of life. Aristophanes' *Clouds* shows how the Socratic critique of the Athenian gods destroys the sanctity of the family, on which the city depends for the moral education of its children.

Philosophy presupposes morality, for philosophy begins from the moral stance that there is nothing more needful than justice and truth. Unless the souls of the young are imbued with an ardent longing for these things, there will be no philosophy, for those souls will be incapable of taking themselves or anything else seriously. At their core they will be frivolously nihilistic, for although they will experience all sorts of things in life as exciting, entertaining, and interesting, they will never ascend to the central question of philosophy because they will not feel the inescapable primacy of the question of what is the right way of life. They may study philosophical books, and they may pride themselves on their philosophic openness to all the serious questions. But when they take up works of political philosophy, they will view those works in a detached way, aesthetically, so to speak, as though they were working on an elegant sort of crossword puzzle or mathematical game. The ultimate consequence of a public critique of morality is the same as the effect of contemporary liberalism in academic life, namely to eviscerate philosophy by turning it into an easygoing moral relativism presided over by various in-groups of cognoscenti who applaud each others' refined interpretations of great books and ideas while they live the quite ordinary life of liberal intellectuals.

Ours is a time of serious revival of the study of classical philosophy, achieved through the efforts of Jacob Klein, Heidegger, and above all Leo Strauss. But that revival has occurred against the background and the opposition of radical modernity. Both Heidegger and Klein have been affected, proba-

14. The expression is from Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 153; Umphrey alludes to it on p. 380 (see my n. 4 above) and discusses it on p. 395.

15. Alfarabi, pp. 67, 37.

bly against their intentions, by this radical modernity. The challenge, then, is to persist in this revival by aspiring to liberate ourselves not from morality but from the chains of modernity in which all of us are bound from childhood on. Of the three thinkers mentioned, Strauss most successfully resisted this enslavement, and he was able to do so because he never forgot that as a Jew living among non-Jews he was ruled by those who, if it came to a fight, would destroy him because of his political and religious heritage. Strauss called this problem “the theologico-political predicament”¹⁶ and he devoted his life to the study of that problem.

It appears that few of Strauss’s students—or the students of his students—are alive to the primacy for political philosophy and political life of the “theologico-political predicament.” One set of students, who may be likened to ancient Epicureans, preoccupy themselves with the study of Great Books as an end in itself—a pleasant activity that is the best that life can offer. For them, political philosophy has apparently come to mean not thoughtful confrontation with the conditions of philosophizing in the world of radical modernity, but rather an exceedingly private, scholarly concern with the exegesis of leading texts in the history of philosophy. Another set of students, more bold and spirited, continues by new means the long war waged by modern liberalism against politics and philosophy. This group—to which Umphrey may belong—enlists the authority of Strauss’s authority, classical political philosophy, and discovers in it—modernity. Against the intention of Strauss’s life work—see especially the tremendous attack on modern liberalism in the Schmitt review and his remarks on that review at the end of the Spinoza preface¹⁷—these scholars are teaching in effect that the one apparently serious alternative to modernity, classical political philosophy, provides in fact a covert endorsement of modern liberalism and ultimately of nihilism.

One of the typical features of both these kinds of students, it must be said, is a secret or open contempt for America and American politics. This is so in spite of the fact that the American regime is one of the few regimes of the modern world whose principles (rightly understood) and conduct are defensible on the basis of the classics. One must indeed admit with Strauss that “the theory of liberal democracy originated . . . in the first and second waves of modernity” and that liberal democracy cannot be defended by a “return to the earlier forms of modern thought: the critique of modern rationalism or of the modern belief in reason by Nietzsche cannot be dismissed or forgotten.” Yet “the theoretical crisis [of liberal democracy] does not necessarily lead to a practical crisis, for the superiority of liberal democracy to communism, Stalinist or post-Stalinist, is obvious enough. And above all, liberal democracy, in contradistinction to communism and fascism, derives powerful support from a way of thinking which cannot be called modern at all: the premodern thought of our Western

16. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), Preface, p. 1.

17. *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, pp. 31 and 331–351.

tradition.”¹⁸ Strauss points here to the most important task of contemporary American statesmanship, whether practiced by scholars or political men: to explain and defend America as a polity springing from and aspiring toward the highest purposes of Western civilization. For “the coming of the universal and homogeneous state will be the end of philosophy on earth.”¹⁹

18. Strauss, “Three Waves of Modernity,” in *Political Philosophy*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill/Pegasus, 1975), p. 98.

19. Strauss, *On Tyranny* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1963), p. 226.