

## Reflections on *The Hemlock Cup* of Bettany Hughes

Dear All,

The opening lines of Aristophanes' *Acharnians* are well suited to introduce my reflections on Bettany Hughes' book on Socrates, which I want to share with you as the date of my protest against the on-going degradation of Classics and Classical Philosophy at Oxford University is approaching: 'Many things stung my heart, few filled me with joy, very few.'

My wife bought Bettany Hughes' book for us to read together. On p. xxiii I read "Plato's Socratic Dialogues – crafted **between twenty and forty years** after Socrates died." On the next page I read: "Archaeological digs – each year – are substantiating and backing up in precise detail the picture of fifth-century Athens that Plato so skilfully and energetically painted **just after Socrates' death.**" On page xxix she writes: "Perhaps *Lysis* was written **while Socrates was still alive.**" My wife was left reading the book on her own.

My wife insisted that I should read it: "Bettany Hughes is brilliant on archaeology. Her Ancient Athens vibrates with life." I have been reading it in spite of my initial misgivings. 'So what is it that I have enjoyed' - Aristophanes muses - about her book?

I have always regarded Alcibiades' description of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* as crucial for our understanding of Socrates; Bettany Hughes has made me realize how little I reflected on it.

After admiring the fortitude that Socrates displayed in the harsh winter during the military campaign at Potidaea, Alcibiades narrates: 'One morning Socrates was thinking about something which he could not resolve; he would not give it up, but continued thinking from early dawn until noon – there he stood fixed in thought; and at noon attention was drawn to him, and the rumour ran through the wondering crowd that Socrates had been standing and thinking about something since the break of day. At last, in the evening after supper, some Ionians out of curiosity (I should explain that this was not in winter but in summer), brought out their mats and slept in the open air that they might watch him and see whether he would stand all night. There he stood until following morning; and with the return of light he offered up a prayer for the sun, and went his way.' (Pl. *Symp.* 220c3-d5, tr. B. Jowett).

Alcibiades does not say what it was that Socrates 'could not resolve but would not give up', but Bettany Hughes ventures to do so, depicting Socrates against the background of her imaginative account of the military campaign at Potidaea: 'By late September there were 3.000 Athenian hoplites in the region ... Here, in the depth of

winter, the middle-aged man (we hear from Alcibiades back in Athens) stands shoeless, for five, ten, fifteen, twenty-four hours at a stretch. Rapt. Lost in his own mind ... The Potidaeans were protecting themselves against rapacious Athenian interests. Did Socrates ever wonder what he was doing in someone else's back yard? As he fought and watched skulls smashing, guts spilled ... Greeks slaughtering Greeks, for honour and to grab land – did he wonder: Why? What is this for? ... the fate of the Potidaeans had started to be shared in the tents of the army camp. Two annual cycles of self-imposed incarceration had degraded and debauched an entire community. The new recruits coming up from Athens appeared to have infected the weak locals with a strange, pustular disease ... More than 1.000 Athenian troops themselves succumbed to the infection while they waited to fight. Those trapped inside the besieged city were worst affected ... The inhabitants who were not struck down by this alien illness could survive now only by eating human flesh – the Potidaeans had become cannibals ... So Socrates fought, and he stood and he waited and he thought ... The orthodox notion of virtue at this time was a courageous, virile, manly concept. Young men were taught *arete* in the gymnasia, during military exercises ... So *arete*, manly virtue, could and did lead to abominable acts ... But Socrates played around with a rather different concept of "goodness" ... for him, virtue was *sophrosune*, temperance, *dikaiosune*, justice, *hosiotetes*, piety and *andreia*, courage, all rolled together into one bigger ambition – *Sophia*, wisdom or knowledge ... Perhaps it is not too fanciful to suggest that, surrounded as he was both by great, human possibilities and by awful, disgusting, debasing human acts, he was trying to will a better, a newly virtuous kind of man out of the world ... Socrates was exposed to so much that was 'bad' that his search for 'the good' was ever more urgent ... as he stood, frozen, a blank stare on his face but his mind whirring within, Socrates developed a new ideology, where the interests of 'the good' came before all other concerns.' (Bettany Hughes, pp. 145-151)

I do not find Bettany Hughes' suggestion fanciful, for I view it as corroborated on the one hand by Plato's *Charmides*, the dialogue that Plato dramatically situated a day after Socrates' return from Potidaea, and on the other by Socrates' autobiographic reflections in Plato's *Phaedo*. In the *Phaedo* Socrates narrates how fascinated he was in his early beginnings when he heard that Anaxagoras considered *nous*, that is Intelligence (D. Gallop) or mind (B. Jowett), as the cause of all things, for in his view this meant that 'a man should consider nothing else, but the best, the highest good' (97d, tr. Gallop). Taking hold of Anaxagoras' book as soon as he could, he became deeply disappointed, for Anaxagoras in his cosmological speculations made no use of his *nous* at all (98b). Finding himself unable to demonstrate that it is 'the good' that holds all things together, he turned his thought to human discourse, determined to search for truth in discussions (99e). Socrates' thoughts on *arete* in the *Charmides* are centred around the notion of 'the good' in contrast to what is 'bad' (163d-e, 174a-d, 175e). It is not too fanciful to suppose

that 'the good' as applied to human affairs, not cosmology, was the notion that kept Socrates standing in the midst of the military camp at Potidaea, rapt in thought, for twenty-four hours.

Let me note that there is a mistake in Bettany Hughes' account of Alcibiades' narrative: 'Here, in the depth of winter (p. 147) ... he stood, frozen (p. 151)'. Alcibiades says explicitly 'that this was not in winter but in summer' (Pl. *Symp.* 220d1).

Let me end by confessing that Bettany Hughes 'stung my heart' by referring Socrates' view that the interests of 'the good' came before all other concerns as 'a new ideology'. I was nurtured on Marx who regarded ideology 'not just as a set of errors of reasoning, but rather as a systematically distorting factor that causes the errors in thought of its victims', as Thomas Mautner puts it in the entry on ideology in his *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Penguin Books 1997). I consulted his dictionary in the hope that he might lessen the sting, and I was not disappointed in my hope: 'The term was first used by Destutt de Tracy in *Eléments d'idéologie* 1796 to designate a projected science of ideas ... The practical objective of this science was to provide a new basis for education, free from any religious and metaphysical prejudices.'

With best wishes,

Julius Tomin