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Cato the Censor and Socrates the Tyrant

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When he was now well on in years, there came as ambassadors from Athens to Rome, Carneades the Academic, and Diogenes the Stoic philosopher ... Upon the arrival of these philosophers, the most studious of the city's youth became their devoted and admiring listeners. ... But Cato, at the very outset, when this zeal for discussion came pouring into the city, was distressed, fearing lest the young men, by giving this direction to their ambition, should come to love a reputation based on mere words more than one achieved by martial deeds. And when the fame of the visiting philosophers rose yet higher in the city ... Cato determined ... to rid and purge the city of them all. So he rose in the Senate and censured the magistrates for keeping in such long suspense an embassy composed of men who could easily secure anything they wished, so persuasive were they. 'We ought', he said, 'to make up our minds ... and vote on what the embassy proposes, in order that these men may return to their schools and lecture to the sons of Greece, while the youth of Rome give ear to their laws and magistrates, as heretofore.' This he did, not, as some think, out of personal hostility to Carneades, but because he was wholly averse to philosophy, and made mock of all Greek culture and training, out of patriotic zeal. He says, for instance, that Socrates was a mighty prattler, who attempted, as best he could, to be his country's tyrant, by abolishing its customs, and by enticing his fellow citizens into opinions contrary to the laws. ... And seeking to prejudice his son against Greek culture, he ... declar[es], in the tone of a prophet or a seer, that Rome would lose her empire when she had become infected with Greek letters.¹

Thus writes Plutarch about Cato the Censor. Plutarch, often described as a 'Platonist' because of his many writings exploring Platonic themes, nevertheless is mostly known for his *Parallel Lives* telling of notable historical or semi-historical Greeks and Romans. As Plutarch follows his characters from birth to

death, questions of character, virtue and vice provide cohesion for his studies. In the preface to his life of Alexander, Plutarch emphasizes that he is writing 'lives' and not histories. To write a life, for him, means to capture his subject's moral character. He explains: 'In the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice. A slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall.' He compares himself to a painter who finds 'character' in 'the face and the expression of the eyes' rather than in the 'other parts of the body'. Thus, he asks to be allowed to devote himself to 'the signs of the souls of men' and let others deal with great battles and 'more weighty matters'.²

The quotation at the head of this chapter is just such an anecdote, intended to illuminate the character, the virtues and the vices, of Marcus Cato, active in Rome during the first half of the second century BCE. We learn early on from Plutarch's 'Life' that Cato led a frugal and temperate life, working in the fields alongside his slaves, scorning profligacy and ostentation. Plutarch reports that Cato 'tells us that he never wore clothing worth more than a hundred drachmas; that he drank ... the same wine as his slaves' (4.3). Stories about his ascetic ways were legion and his pithy aphorisms about the deformity of vice point to Cato's impatience with those who had abandoned the virtues and moral rectitude of early Rome. The enmity between himself and the great Roman general Scipio, the protector of Rome against Hannibal, for instance, arose from Cato's criticism of Scipio's financial generosity to his soldiers. Such generosity, Cato claimed, would corrupt 'the native simplicity of his soldiers, who resorted to wanton pleasures when their pay exceeded their actual needs' (3.5). Cato openly denounced Scipio in the Senate as one 'whose boyish addiction to palaestras and theatres' suggested a 'Master of a festival' and not a 'commander of an army' (3.7).

At the same time as Plutarch records such 'signs of [Cato's] soul', he also traces Cato's rise from obscurity to political power, such that he is first elected Consul and, most importantly, ten years later Censor. The Censorship was a position that (in Plutarch's words) 'towered ... above every other civic honour, and was, in a way, the culmination of a political career' (16.1). Plutarch explains the position and functions of the Roman Censor, two of whom were elected each year:

The variety of its powers was great, including that of examining into the lives and manners of the citizens. Its creators thought that no one should be left to his own devices and desires, without inspection and review, either in his marriage, or in the begetting of his children, or in the ordering of his daily life, or in the entertainment of his friends.

In language recalling his own practice of assessing human character, Plutarch adds that the Romans, 'thinking that these things revealed a man's real character more than did his public and political career, they set men in office to watch, admonish, and chastise, that no one should turn aside to wantonness and forsake his native and customary mode of life'. These Censors 'had authority to degrade a knight, or to expel a senator who led an unbridled and disorderly life' (16.1–16.2).³ Plutarch's account underscores the differences, while anticipating the connection, between the Roman Censorship and later understandings of censorship as the control of expression.

Ancient Roman historians such as Sallust and Livy attribute Rome's spectacular development to the virtue of her citizens, whether the private virtue of chastity exemplified by Lucretia, whose suicide after being raped led to the overthrow of the kings, or Horatio's courage defending the bridge against the invading Etruscans. The decline of Rome, as imagined by Sallust in particular, followed the abandonment of those virtues and the purpose of writing history was to offer *exempla* of such deeds for the Roman youth to emulate. Like their ancestors, they were to devote themselves to the glory of the Republic, irrespective of the cost to themselves. Censorship, therefore, in its initial formulation, was to prevent the loss of those virtues that were judged the source and foundation of Rome's greatness. The Censor intervened in the lives of citizens insofar as such interventions might preserve that ancient morality essential to the stability and success of the polity. Through the office of the Censor the Romans institutionalized efforts to maintain that citizen virtue. It would, they hoped, ensure that the profligacy that might arise from the riches flowing into Rome as the result of her imperial expansion did not undermine the moral fibre of just those citizens who would serve as soldiers and as models for the young. Profligacy was not simply a personal vice; it undermined the entire political body.

Cato, as a practitioner of the modest hard-working life with little time for private pleasures, was the perfect candidate for an office devoted to protecting Rome from the incursion of what were feared as alien and threatening mores and practices. And just as threatening to the ancient Roman virtues as the wealth and customs of the nations that Rome was conquering was Greek philosophy, bound up as it was with questioning all things and with its emphasis on the power of speech rather than deeds. Thus, Rome needed to be rid of those representatives of Greek philosophy, Carneades the Academic Sceptic (who could argue for justice one day and make the opposite argument the next) and Diogenes the Stoic, before their practices of philosophic

questioning could infect Rome's youth. The danger that Cato perceives from the visiting Greeks leads Plutarch to report Cato's infamous remark about Socrates' tyrannical ambitions. Earlier in the 'Life', when Plutarch was noting Cato's excellence as a father, he quotes Cato's remark: 'There was nothing else to admire in Socrates of old except that he was always kind and gentle in his intercourse with a shrewish wife and stupid sons' (20.2) – a backhanded compliment if ever there was one.

Cato's attitude towards Socrates sits uneasily next to the sort of praise that Socrates has earned from others, both ancient and modern. Plato ends the *Phaedo*, his dialogue recounting the death of Socrates, calling Socrates the 'best and wisest and most just' of all men who lived in their time.⁴ According to Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Socrates, 'by letting his own light shine, ... led his disciples to hope that they through imitation of him would attain to such excellence'.⁵ John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* writes, 'Mankind can hardly be too often reminded, that there was once a man named Socrates' who was 'the head and prototype of all subsequent teachers of virtue'. Cato, however, was not so easily drawn into this chorus of admirers. And while Plato, Xenophon and Mill all express their dismay or even horror at the execution of the man who (in Mill's language) 'probably of all then born had deserved best of mankind', Cato ascribes to Socrates the most hated name, for Romans, of 'tyrant'.⁶ Concerned as Cato was with maintaining the greatness of the Republic, he portrays Socrates as a threat to the city and its young.

Though the lives of both Cato and Socrates were marked by moderation and abstinence, Cato sensed in Socratic philosophy a threat to the traditional virtues of the city – one based on Socrates' claim that his wisdom lay in knowing that he did not know. Cato saw in his own life of hard work and devotion to Rome, in his refusal to drink the best wines, eat the finest delicacies or wear jewel-encrusted robes, a commitment to carrying on the founding principles of those who had built and guided Rome in its early years. As Censor he was entrusted with preserving what was now threatened by the new sources of honour. Scipio, indulging his soldiers with wealth and land, fostered a focus on sensual satisfactions, thereby weakening the bodies with which they might fight for Rome. Philosophy's crime was to make men find power and success in speech rather than in the deeds, the austere practices and values of republican Rome. Socrates had urged his followers to question the ancient mores, not to venerate them, and to see inherent contradictions in their assumed certainties. The speech of such a man could dismantle the laws and tradition that preserved and protected the polity about which Cato cared so deeply.

In a peculiar section of Plato's *Apology*, Socrates allies himself with Achilles, the great Homeric hero, who willingly faced death, fearing more to live as a coward than not avenge the death of his comrade Patroclus. Like Achilles, Socrates also willingly faces death, but the absurdity of this assimilation of the glorious demigod and noble warrior to the stooped, bug-eyed, snub-nosed old man would have been apparent to all. The analogy between himself and Achilles mocks the traditional hero who performed great deeds on the battlefield. Socrates offends Cato's principles even more when he explains his decision to remove himself from traditional forms of political engagement: 'A man who really fights for the right, if he is to preserve his life for even a little while, must be a private citizen, not a public man' (32a). As a private man he talks to all, young and old, citizen and foreigner (30a). His conversations serve the city not by supporting its ancient traditions, but by unsettling the city. Outrageously calling himself a gift from the gods, he explains (in what he calls a laughable image) that he is a gadfly biting the large sleepy horse that is Athens, reproaching her citizens for not caring truly about justice and the other virtues, for being too complacent to allow philosophic inquiry to distract them from their daily lives (29e). But just like the horse with the gadfly that is biting it, he predicts that Athens is likely to slap at him and easily kill him – and so they do.

Scholars have suggested multiple reasons for Socrates' execution by the Athenian democracy in 399 BCE,⁷ but none has given much credence to Cato's suggestion that Socrates longed for tyranny. Should they? Xenophon, as he tries to defend Socrates against accusations of corrupting the youth, explores the sources of those accusations. He cites one accuser who said that Socrates taught his companions to 'despise the established laws by insisting on the folly of appointing public officials by lot', something that would not be done when choosing the pilot of a ship. This, the accuser argued, 'led the young to despise the established constitution and made them violent' (I.2.9). Xenophon also describes Socrates' relationship with Critias (who later became one of the Thirty Tyrants installed by the Spartans at Athens after they defeated Athens in the Peloponnesian War) and Alcibiades, the flamboyant and 'insolent' (according to Xenophon) Athenian general who eventually defected first to the Spartans and then to the Persians. Xenophon explains that these two came to Socrates as ambitious young men who admired his independence and especially his ability to control others through speech. They hoped that by associating with Socrates they would 'attain the utmost facility in speech and action'. Once they acquired that facility, however, they no longer needed Socrates and pursued political power on their own. Socrates' philosophic explorations gave them tools for

acquiring power, Xenophon argues, but they themselves were responsible for using that power as they did (I.2.12–I.2.16). And yet, without a Socrates, they would have lacked the verbal skills to achieve their political goals.

In Plato's version of the *Apology*, Socrates credits the prejudices against himself in part to Aristophanes' comedy *The Clouds*. The story told there matches just what Xenophon tries to discount. Socrates, the teacher of the art of speech that can make the worse cause appear the better, enables one practising that art to become powerful. The principles behind this art of speaking surface in *The Clouds* in a speech offered in Socrates' supposed school, the Thinkery. A figure cast as 'Unjust Speech' articulates Socrates' new education, one that mocks virtues like moderation.⁸ A heavily indebted Athenian whom Aristophanes calls Strepsiades has sent his son to Socrates' school to learn this art of speech so that he might help his father weasel out of his debts. The problem set by the comedy, though, is that the son learns the lessons too well and justifies through argument beating his father and then also his mother. Strepsiades comes to realize the consequences of urging his son to study with Socrates. If a son can beat his mother, what else is open to him? Not only is the economic foundation of the city threatened, but, in Aristophanes' portrayal, the family itself disappears with Socrates' new education. Realizing this, Strepsiades is beside himself; his response is to burn down Socrates' school, to destroy those who mock the old and introduce those new arts that undermine the traditional forms of self-discipline and grant power to those who know how to manipulate words rather than perform well.

Power in this tale derives from speech, not moral virtue. An education that develops such mental agility threatens the security of the political body; it questions the old, unsettles the givens according to which the young have been raised, mocks the ancient heroes and opens the door for new sources of power, especially tyrannical power. Strepsiades uses the only resource he has to fight the threat: fire. The Athenians had grander resources than fire, namely a legal system that allowed those threatened by Socrates to indict him on the charges of corrupting the young and introducing new gods into the city. While we may find Socrates honourable in his efforts to unsettle the Athenians, the Athenians themselves (and Cato) saw the dangers that Socrates posed to the fabric of Athenian society by practising such 'corrosive' citizenship.⁹ For Cato, Socrates – and by association philosophy – corrupts the young; those later representatives of philosophy, Carneades and Diogenes, likewise threaten to corrupt Roman youth as Socrates corrupted the young of Athens.

Socrates' execution troubles modern readers. Democratic Athens created no such office as the Censor. Indeed, they prided themselves on their practice of free/frank speech (*parrhêsia*), naming one of the city's ships *Parrhêsia*, and Socrates in several Platonic dialogues prided himself on practising *parrhêsia*. Yet, the Athenians also discovered the challenges of allowing for unbridled *parrhêsia*. The term itself entails more than the modern language of 'free speech'; it emphasizes daring, a willingness to question authority, a freedom to speak what one truly believes, without dissimulation or flattery. *Parrhêsia* (and *isegoria*, equal freedom to speak) lay at the heart of a democratic Athens that depended on the open discussion of issues confronting the city: war, peace, expansion, taxes. But the city nevertheless found itself threatened by this practice. The boldness to speak openly can also – as in Socrates's case – trigger a lack of reverence for the foundational principles of the society in which such unlimited speech is enjoyed. The challenges that Socrates posed to the accepted definitions of moral terms – 'courage', 'virtue', 'piety', 'moderation', 'justice' – and the way he flustered his interlocutors when he interrogated them about the meaning of such words may have fully expressed this democratic *parrhêsia*, but it also captured the fundamental tension in a democracy that relies on openness but also suffers from the instability created by philosophic questioning.

The universal adoration of Socrates over time makes Cato's description of Socrates shocking. A prattling old man talking with the young could hardly be a tyrannical threat to the city – and yet, precisely by daring to urge the youth to question the givens of their moral lives, he was. Strepsiades recognized it, though the solution to the threat he posed was crude. Socrates' accusers in Athens recognized it and executed him. Cato recognized it and as Censor, the defender of moderation, asceticism and the ancient virtues, thus demanded the banishment of philosophy from Rome. It was all part of his effort to protect the young from the 'corrosive' practice that would undermine a devotion to the Republic and introduce into the city a dangerous new source of political power, the facility with words.