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Consolation for

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A few years ago, during a bitter New York winter, with an afternoon to spare before catching a flight to London, I found myself in a deserted gallery on the upper level of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was brightly lit, and aside from the soothing hum of an under-floor heating system, entirely silent. Having reached a surfeit of paintings in the Impressionist galleries, I was looking for a sign for the cafeteria - where I hoped to buy a glass of a certain variety of American chocolate milk of which I was at that time extremely fond - when my eye was caught by a canvas which a

caption explained had been painted in Paris in the autumn of 1786 by the thirty-eight-year-old Jacques-Louis David.

Socrates, condemned to death by the citizens of Athens, prepares to drink a cup of hemlock, surrounded by woebegone friends. In the spring of 399 EC, three Athenian citizens had brought legal proceedings against the philosopher. They had accused him of failing to worship the city's gods, of introducing religious novelties and of corrupting the young men of Athens - and such was the severity of their charges, they had called for the death penalty.

Socrates had responded with legendary equanimity. Though afforded an opportunity to renounce his philosophy in court, he had sided with what he believed to be true rather than what he knew would be popular. In Plato's account he had defiantly told the jury:

So long as I have breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practising philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet . . . And so gentlemen . . . whether you acquit me or nor, you know that I am not going to alter my conduct, not even if I have to die a hundred deaths.

And so he had been led to meet his end in an Athenian jail, his death marking a defining moment in the history of philosophy.

An indication of its significance may be the frequency with which it has been painted. In 1650 the French painter Charles-Alphonse Dufresnoy produced a *Death of Socrates*, now hanging in the Galleria Palarina in Florence (which has no cafeteria).

Jacques-Louis David received his commission in the spring of 1786 from Charles-Michei Trudaine de la Sabliere, a wealthy member of the Parlement and a gifted Greek scholar. The terms were generous, 6,000 livres upfront, with a further 3,000 on delivery (Louis xvi had paid only 6,000 livres for the larger *Oath of the Horatii*). When the picture was exhibited at the Salon of 1787, it was at once judged the finest of the Socratic ends. Sir Joshua Reynolds thought it 'the most exquisite and admirable effort of art "which has appeared since the *Capella Sistina*, and the *Stanze of Raphael*. The picture would have done honour to Athens in the age of Pericles.'

I bought five postcard Davids in the museum gift-shop and later, flying over the ice fields of Newfoundland (turned a luminous green by a full moon and a cloudless sky), examined one while picking at a pale evening meal left on the table in front of me by a

stewardess during a misjudged snooze.

Plato sits at the foot of the bed, a pen and a scroll beside him, silent witness to the injustice of the state. He had been twenty-nine at the time of Socrates' death, but David turned him into an old man, grey-haired and grave. Through the passageway, Socrates' wife, Xanthippe, is escorted from the prison cell by warders- Seven friends are in various stages of lamentation. Socrates' closest companion Crito, seated beside him, gazes at the master with devotion and concern. But the philosopher, bolt upright, with an athlete's torso and biceps, shows neither apprehension nor regret. That a large number of Athenians have denounced him as foolish has not shaken him in his convictions. David had planned to paint Socrates in the act of swallowing poison, but the poet Andre Chenier suggested that there would be greater dramatic tension if he was shown finishing a philosophical point while at the same time reaching serenely for the hemlock that would end his life, symbolizing both obedience to the laws of Athens and allegiance to his calling. We are witnessing the last edifying moments of a transcendent being.

If the postcard struck me so forcefully, it was perhaps because the behaviour it depicted contrasted so sharply with my own. In conversations, my priority was to be liked, rather than to speak the truth. A desire to please led me to laugh at modest jokes like a parent on the opening night of a school play. With strangers, I adopted the servile manner of a concierge greeting wealthy clients in a hotel - salival enthusiasm born of a morbid, indiscriminate desire for affection. I did not publicly doubt ideas to which the majority was committed. I sought the approval of figures of authority and after encounters with them, worried at length whether they had thought me acceptable. When passing through customs or driving alongside police cars, I harboured a confused wish for the uniformed officials to think well of me.

But the philosopher had not buckled before unpopularity and the condemnation of the state. He had not retracted his thoughts because others had complained. Moreover, his confidence had sprung from a more profound source than hot-headedness or bull-like courage. It had been grounded in philosophy. Philosophy had supplied Socrates with convictions in which he had been able to have rational, as opposed to hysterical, confidence when faced with disapproval.

That night, above the ice lands, such independence of mind was a revelation and an incitement. It promised a counterweight to a

supreme tendency to follow socially sanctioned practices and ideas. In Socrates' life and death lay an invitation to intelligent scepticism.

And more generally, the subject of which the Greek philosopher was the supreme symbol seemed to offer an invitation to take on a task at once profound and laughable: to become wise through philosophy. In spite of the vast differences between the many thinkers described as philosophers across time (people in actuality so diverse that had they been gathered together at a giant cocktail Party, they would not only have had nothing to say to one another, but would most probably have come to blows after a few drinks) it seemed possible to discern a small group of men, separated by centuries, sharing a loose allegiance to a vision of philosophy suggested by the Greek etymology of the word -philo, love; *sophia* wisdom - a group bound by a common interest in saying a few consoling and practical things about the causes of our greatest griefs. It was to these men I would turn.

2

Every society has notions of what one should believe and how one should behave in order to avoid suspicion and unpopularity. Some of these societal conventions are given explicit formulation in a legal code, others are more intuitively held in a vast body of ethical and practical judgements described as 'common sense', which dictates what we should wear, which financial values we should adopt, whom we should esteem, which etiquette we should follow and what domestic life we should lead. To start questioning these conventions would seem bizarre, even aggressive. If common sense is cordoned off from questions, it is because its judgements are deemed plainly too sensible to be the targets of scrutiny,

It would scarcely be acceptable, for example, to ask in the course of an ordinary conversation what our society holds to be the purpose of work.

Or to ask a recently married couple to explain in full the reasons behind their decision.

Or to question holiday-makers in detail about the assumptions behind their trip.

Ancient Greeks had as many common-sense conventions and would have held on to them as tenaciously. One weekend, while browsing in a second-hand bookshop in Bloomsbury, I came upon a series of history books originally intended for children, containing a host of photographs and handsome illustrations. The series included *See Inside an Egyptian Town*, *See Inside a Castle* and a volume I acquired along with an encyclopedia of poisonous plants, *See Inside an Ancient Greek Town*.

There was information on how it had been considered normal to dress in the city states of Greece 111 the fifth century BC.

The book explained that the Greeks had believed in many gods, gods of love, hunting and war, gods with power over the harvest, fire and sea. Before embarking on any venture they had prayed to them either in a temple or in a small shrine at home, and sacrificed animals in their honour. It had been expensive: Athena cost a cow; Artemis and Aphrodite a goat; Asclepius a hen or cock.

The Greeks had felt sanguine about owning slaves. In the fifth century BC, in Athens alone, there were, at any one time, 80-100,000 slaves, one slave to every three of the free population.

The Greeks had been highly militaristic, too, worshipping courage on the battlefield. To be considered an adequate male, one had to know how to scythe the heads off adversaries. The Athenian soldier ending the career of a Persian (painted on a plate at the time of the Second Persian War) indicated the appropriate behaviour.

Women had been entirely under the thumb of their husbands and fathers. They had taken no part in politics or public life, and had been unable either to inherit property or to own money. They had normally married at thirteen, their husbands chosen for them by their fathers irrespective of emotional compatibility.

None of which would have seemed remarkable to the contemporaries of Socrates. They would have been confounded and angered if I asked exactly why they sacrificed cocks to Asclepius or why I needed to kill to be virtuous. It would have appeared as if I wondering why spring followed winter or why ice was

cold.

But it is not only the hostility of others that may prevent us from questioning the status quo. Our will to doubt can be just as powerfully sapped by an internal sense that societal conventions must have a sound basis, even if we are not sure exactly what this may be, because they have been adhered to by a great many people for a long time. It seems implausible that our society could be gravely mistaken in its beliefs and at the same time that we would be alone in noticing the fact. We stifle our doubts and follow the flock because we cannot conceive of ourselves as pioneers of hitherto unknown, difficult truths.

It is for help in overcoming our meekness that we may turn to the philosopher.

3

1. The life

He was born in Athens in 469 BC, his father Sophroniscus was believed to have been a sculptor, his mother Phaenarete a midwife. In his youth, Socrates was a pupil of the philosopher Archelaus, and thereafter practised philosophy without ever writing any of it down. He did not charge for his lessons and so slid into poverty;

though he had little concern for material possessions. He wore the same cloak throughout the year and almost always walked barefoot (it was said he had been born to spite shoemakers). By the time of his death he was married and the father of three sons. His wife, Xanthippe, was of notoriously foul temper (when asked why he had married her, he replied that horse-trainers needed to practise on the most spirited animals). He spent much time out of the house, conversing with friends in the public places of Athens. They appreciated his wisdom and sense of humour. Few can have appreciated his looks. He was short, bearded and bald, with a curious rolling gait, and a face variously likened by acquaintances to the head of a crab, a satyr or a grotesque. His nose was flat, his lips large,

and his prominent swollen eyes sat beneath a pair of unruly brows.

But his most curious feature was a habit of approaching Athenians of every class, age and occupation and bluntly asking them, without worrying whether they would think him eccentric or infuriating, to explain with precision why they held certain common-sense beliefs and what they took to be the meaning of life - as one surprised general reported:

Whenever anyone comes face to face with Socrates and has a conversation with him, what invariably happens is that, although he may have started on a completely different subject first, Socrates will keep heading him off as they're talking until he has him trapped into giving an account of his present life-style and the way he has spent his life in the past. And once he has him trapped, Socrates won't let him go before he has well and truly cross-examined him from every angle.

He was helped in his habit by climate and urban planning. Athens was warm for half the year, which increased opportunities for conversing without formal introduction with people outdoors. Activities which in northern lands unfolded behind the mud walls of sombre, smoke-filled huts needed no shelter from the benevolent Attic skies. It was common to linger in the agora, under the colonnades of the Painted Stoa or the Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios, and talk to strangers in the late afternoon, the privileged hours between the practicalities of high noon and the anxieties of night.

The size of the city ensured conviviality. Around 240,000 people lived within Athens and its port. No more than an hour was needed to walk from one end of the city to the other, from Piraeus to Aigeus gate. Inhabitants could feel connected like pupils at a school or guests at a wedding. It wasn't only lunatics and drunkards who began conversations with strangers in public.

If we refrain from questioning the status quo, it is - aside from the weather and the size of our cities - primarily because we associate what is popular with what is right. The sandalless philosopher raised a plethora of questions to determine whether what was popular happened to make any sense.

2. The rule of common sense

Many found the questions maddening. Some teased him. A few would kill him. In *The Clouds*, performed for the first time at the theatre of Dionysus in the spring of 423 BC, Aristophanes offered Athenians a caricature of the philosopher in their midst who refused to accept common sense without investigating its logic at impudent length. The actor playing Socrates appeared on stage in a basket suspended from a crane, for he claimed his mind worked better at high altitude. He was immersed in such important thoughts that he had no time to wash or to perform household tasks, his cloak was therefore malodorous and his home infested with vermin, but at least he could consider life's most vital questions. These included: how many of its own lengths can a flea jump? And do gnats hum through their mouths or their anuses? Though Aristophanes omitted to elaborate on the results of Socrates' questions, the audience must have been left with an adequate sense of their relevance.

Aristophanes was articulating a familiar criticism of intellectuals: that through their questions they drift further from sensible views than those who have never ventured to analyse matters in a systematic way. Dividing the playwright and the philosopher was a contrasting assessment of the adequacy of ordinary explanations. Whereas sane people could in Aristophanes' eyes rest in the knowledge that fleas jumped far given their size and that gnats made a noise from somewhere, Socrates stood accused of a manic suspicion of common sense and of harbouring a perverse hunger for complicated, inane alternatives.

To which Socrates would have replied that in certain cases, though perhaps not those involving fleas, common sense might warrant more profound inquiry. After brief conversations with many Athenians, popular views on how to lead a good life, views described as normal and so beyond question by the majority, revealed surprising inadequacies of which the confident manner of their proponents had given no indication. Contrary to what Aristophanes hoped, it seemed that those Socrates spoke to barely knew what they were talking about.

3. Two conversations

One afternoon in Athens, to follow Plato's *Laches*, the philosopher came upon two esteemed generals, Nicias and Laches. The generals had fought the Spartan armies in the battles of the Peloponnesian War, and had earned the respect of the city's elders and the admiration of the young. Both were to die as soldiers; Laches in the battle of Mantinea in 418 BC, Nicias in the ill-fated expedition to Sicily in 413 BC. No portrait of them survives, though one imagines that in battle they might have resembled two horsemen on a section of the Parthenon frieze.

The generals were attached to one common-sense idea. They believed that in order to be courageous, a person had to belong to an army, advance in battle and kill adversaries. But on encountering them under open skies, Socrates felt inclined to ask a few more questions:

SOCRATES: Let's try to say what courage is, Laches.

LACHES: My word, Socrates, that's not difficult! If a man is prepared to stand in the ranks, face up to the enemy and not run away, you can be sure that he's courageous.

But Socrates remembered that at the battle of Plataea in 479 BC, a Greek force under the Spartan regent Pausanias had initially retreated, then courageously defeated the Persian army under Mardonius:

SOCRATES: At the battle of Plataea, so the story goes, the Spartans came up against [the Persians], but weren't willing to stand and fight, and fell back. The Persians broke ranks in pursuit; but then the Spartans wheeled round fighting like cavalry and hence won that part of the battle.

Forced to think again, Laches came forward with a second common-sense idea: that courage was a kind of endurance. But endurance could, Socrates pointed out, be directed towards rash ends. To distinguish true courage from delirium, another element would be required. Laches' companion Nicias, guided by Socrates,

proposed that courage would have to involve knowledge, an awareness of good and evil, and could not always be limited to warfare.

In only a brief outdoor conversation, great inadequacies had been discovered in the standard definition of a much-admired Athenian virtue. It had been shown not to take into account the possibility of courage off the battlefield or the importance of knowledge being combined with endurance. The issue might have seemed trifling but its implications were immense. If a general had previously been taught that ordering his army to retreat was cowardly, even "when it seemed the only sensible manoeuvre, then the redefinition broadened his options and emboldened him against criticism.

In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates was again in conversation with someone supremely confident of the truth of a common-sense idea. Meno was an imperious aristocrat who was visiting Africa from his native Thessaly and had an idea about the relation of money to virtue. In order to be virtuous, he explained to Socrates, one had to be very rich, and poverty was invariably a personal failing rather than an accident.

We lack a portrait of Meno, too, though on looking through a Greek men's magazine in the lobby of an Athenian hotel, I imagined that he might have borne a resemblance to a man drinking champagne in an illuminated swimming pool.

The virtuous man, Meno confidently informed Socrates, was someone of great wealth who could afford good things. Socrates asked a few more questions:

SOCRATES: By good do you mean such things as health and wealth?

MENO: I include the acquisition of both gold and silver, and of high and honourable office in the state.

SOCRATES : Are these the only kind of good things you recognize?

MENO: Yes, I mean everything of that sort.

SOCRATES: ... Do you add 'just and righteous' to the word 'acquisition', or doesn't it make any difference to you? Do you call it virtue all the same even if they are unjustly acquired:

MENO: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: So it seems that justice or temperance or piety, or some other part of virtue must attach to the acquisition [of gold and silver]... In fact, lack of gold and silver, if it results from a failure to acquire them ... in circumstances which would have made their acquisition unjust, is itself virtue.

MENO: It looks like it.

SOCRATES: Then to have such goods is no more virtue than to lack them...

MENO: Your conclusion seems inescapable.

In a few moments, Meno had been shown that money and influence were not in themselves necessary and sufficient features of virtue. Rich people could be admirable, but this depended on how their wealth had been acquired, just as poverty could not by itself reveal anything of the moral worth of an individual. There was no binding reason for a wealthy man to assume that his assets guaranteed his virtue; and no binding reason for a poor one to imagine that his indigence was a sign of depravity.

4. Why others may not know

The topics may have dated, but the underlying moral has not: other people may be wrong, even when they are in important positions, even when they are espousing beliefs held for centuries by vast majorities. And the reason is simple: they have not examined their beliefs logically.

Meno and the generals held unsound ideas because they had absorbed the prevailing norms without testing their logic. To point out the peculiarity of their passivity, Socrates compared living without thinking systematically to practising an activity like pottery or shoemaking without following or even knowing of technical procedures. One would never imagine that a good pot or shoe could result from intuition alone; why then assume that the more complex task of directing one's life could be

undertaken without any sustained reflection on premises or goals?

Perhaps because we don't believe that directing our lives is in fact complicated. Certain difficult activities look very difficult from the outside, while other, equally difficult activities look very easy. Arriving at sound views on how to live falls into the second category, making a pot or a shoe into the first.

Making it was clearly a formidable task. Clay first had to be brought to Athens, usually from a large pit at Cape Kolias 7 miles south of the city, and placed on a wheel, spun at between 50 and 150 rotations per minute, the speed inversely proportional to the diameter of the part being moulded (the narrower the pot, the faster the wheel). Then came sponging, scraping, brushing and handle-making.

Next, the vase had to be coated with a black glaze made from fine compact clay mixed with potash. Once the glaze was dry, the vase was placed in a kiln, heated to 800 °C with the air vent open. It turned a deep red, the result of clay hardening into ferric oxide (Fe_2O_3). Thereafter, it was fired to 950 °C with the air vent closed and wet leaves added to the kiln for moisture, which turned the body of the vase a greyish black and the glaze a sintered black (magnetite, Fe_3O_4). After a few hours, the air vent was reopened, the leaves raked out and the temperature allowed to drop to 900 °C. While the glaze retained the black of the second firing, the body of the vase returned to the deep red of the first.

It isn't surprising that few Athenians were drawn to spin their own vases without thinking. Pottery looks as difficult as it is. Unfortunately, arriving at good ethical ideas doesn't, belonging instead to a troublesome class of superficially simple but inherently complex activities.

Socrates encourages us not to be unnerved by the confidence of people who fail to respect this complexity and formulate their views without at least as much rigour as a potter. What is declared obvious and 'natural' rarely is so. Recognition of this should teach us to think that the world is more flexible than it seems, for the established views have frequently emerged not through a process of faultless reasoning, but through centuries of intellectual muddle. There may be no good reason for things to be the way they are.

5. How to think for oneself

The philosopher does not only help us to conceive that others may be wrong, he offers us a simple method by which we can ourselves determine what is right. Few philosophers have had a more minimal sense of what is needed to begin a thinking life. We do not need years of formal education and a leisured existence. Anyone with a curious and well-ordered mind who seeks to evaluate a common-sense belief can start a conversation with a friend in a city street and, by following a Socratic method, may arrive at one or two ground-breaking ideas in under half an hour.

Socrates' method of examining common sense is observable in all Plato's early and middle dialogues and, because it follows consistent steps, may without injustice be presented in the language of a recipe book or manual, and applied to any belief one is asked to accept or feels inclined to rebel against. The correctness of a statement cannot, the method suggests, be determined by whether it is held by a majority or has been believed for a long time by important people. A correct statement is one incapable of being rationally contradicted. A statement is true if it cannot be disproved. If it can, however many believe it, however grand they may be, it must be false and we are right to doubt it.

The Socratic method for thinking

1. Locate a statement confidently described as common sense.

Acting courageously involves not retreating in battle.

Being virtuous requires money.

2. Imagine for a moment that, despite the confidence of the person proposing it, the statement is false. Search for situations or contexts

where the statement would not be true.

Could one ever be courageous and yet retreat in battle?

Could one ever stay firm in battle and yet not be courageous?

Could one ever have money and not be virtuous?

Could one ever have no money and be virtuous?

3. If an exception is found, the definition must be false or at least imprecise.

It is possible to be courageous and retreat.

It is possible to stay firm in battle yet not be courageous.

It is possible to have money and be a crook.

It is possible to be poor and virtuous.

4. The initial statement must be nuanced to take the exception into account.

Acting courageously can involve both retreat and advance in battle.

People who have money can be described as virtuous only if they have acquired it in a virtuous way, and some people with no money can be virtuous when they have lived through situations where it was impossible to be virtuous and make money.

5. If one subsequently finds exceptions to the improved statements, the process should be repeated. The truth, in so far as a human being is able to attain such a thing, lies in a statement which it seems impossible to disprove. It is by finding out what something is not that one comes closest to understanding what it is.

6. The product of thought is, whatever Aristophanes insinuated, superior to the product of intuition.

It may of course be possible to arrive at truths without philosophizing. Without following a Socratic method, we may realize that people with no money may be called virtuous if they have lived through situations in which it was impossible to be virtuous and make money, or that acting courageously can involve retreat in battle. But we risk not knowing how to respond to people who don't agree with us, unless we have first thought through the objections to our position logically. We may be silenced by impressive figures who tell us forcefully that money is essential to virtue and that only effeminate retreat in battle. Lacking counterargu-

ments to lend us strength (the battle of Plataea and enrichment in a corrupt society), we will have to propose limply or petulantly that we feel we are right, without being able to explain why.

Socrates described a correct belief held without an awareness of how to respond rationally to objections as true opinion, and contrasted it unfavourably with knowledge, which involved understanding not only why something was true, but also why its alternatives were false. He likened the two versions of the truth to beautiful works by the great sculptor Daedalus. A truth produced by intuition was like a statue set down without support on an outdoor plinth.

A strong wind could at any time knock it over. But a truth supported by reasons and an awareness of counterarguments was like a statue anchored to the ground by tethering cables.

Socrates' method of thinking promised us a way to develop opinions in which we could, even if confronted with a storm, feel veritable confidence.

In his seventieth year, Socrates ran into a hurricane. Three Athenians - the poet Meletus, the politician Anytus and the orator Lycon - decided that he was a strange and evil man. They claimed that he had failed to worship the city's gods, had corrupted the social fabric of Athens and had turned young men against their fathers. They believed it was right that he should be silenced, and perhaps even killed.

The city of Athens had established procedures for distinguishing right from wrong. On the south side of the agora stood the Court of the Heliasts, a large building with wooden benches for a jury at one end, and a prosecution and defendant's platform at the other. Trials began with a speech from the prosecution, followed by a speech from the defence. Then a jury numbering between 200 and 2,500 people would indicate where the truth lay by a ballot or a show of hands. This method of deciding right from wrong by counting the number of people in favour of a proposition was used throughout Athenian political and legal life. Two or three times a month, all male citizens, some 30,000, were invited to gather on Pnyx hill south-west of the agora to decide on important questions of state by a show of hands. For the city, the opinion of the majority had been equated with the truth.

There were 500 citizens in the jury on the day of Socrates' trial. The prosecution began by asking them to consider that the philosopher standing before them was a dishonest man. He had inquired into things below the earth and in the sky, he was a heretic, he had resorted to shifty rhetorical devices to make weaker arguments defeat stronger ones, and he had been a vicious influence on the young, intentionally corrupting them through his conversations.

Socrates tried to answer the charges. He explained that he had never held theories about the heavens nor investigated things below the earth, he was not a heretic and very much believed in divine activity; he had never corrupted the youth of Athens - it was just that some young men with wealthy fathers and plenty of free time had imitated his questioning method, and annoyed important people by showing them up as know-nothings. If he had corrupted anyone, it could only have been unintentionally, for there was no point in wilfully exerting a bad influence on companions, because one risked being harmed by them in turn. And if he had corrupted people only unintentionally, then the correct procedure was a quiet word to set him straight, not a court case.

He admitted that he had led what might seem a peculiar life:

I have neglected the things that concern most people - making money; managing an estate, gaining military or civic honours, or other positions of power, or joining political clubs and parties which have formed in our cities.

However, his pursuit of philosophy had been motivated by a simple desire to improve the lives of Athenians:

I tried to persuade each of you not to think more of practical advantages than of his mental and moral well-being.

Such was his commitment to philosophy, he explained, that he was unable to give up the activity even if the jury made it the condition for his acquittal:

I shall go on saying in my usual way, 'My very good friend, you are an Athenian and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honour, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?' And should any of you dispute that, and profess that he does

care about such things, I won't let him go straight away nor leave him, but will question and examine and put him to the test... I shall do this to everyone I meet, young or old, foreigner or fellow-citizen.

It was the turn of the jury of 500 to make up their minds. After brief deliberation 220 decided Socrates wasn't guilty; 280 that he was. The philosopher responded wryly: 'I didn't think the margin would be so narrow.' But he did not lose confidence; there was no hesitation or alarm; he maintained faith in a philosophical project that had been declared conclusively misconceived by a majority 56 per cent of his audience.

If we cannot match such composure, if we are prone to burst into tears after only a few harsh words about our character or achievements, it may be because the approval of others forms an essential part of our capacity to believe that we are right. We feel justified in taking unpopularity seriously not only for pragmatic reasons, for reasons of promotion or survival, but more importantly because being jeered at can seem an unequivocal sign that we have gone astray.

Socrates would naturally have conceded that there are times when we are in the wrong and should be made to doubt our views, but he would have added a vital detail to alter our sense of truth's relation to unpopularity: errors in our thought and way of life can at no point and in no way ever be proven simply by the fact that we have run into opposition.

What should worry us is not the number of people who oppose us, but how good their reasons are for doing so. We should therefore divert our attention away from the presence of unpopularity to the explanations for it. It may be frightening to hear that a high proportion of a community holds us to be wrong, but before abandoning our position, we should consider the method by which their conclusions have been reached. It is the soundness of their method of thinking that should determine the weight we give to their disapproval.

We seem afflicted by the opposite tendency: to listen to everyone, to be upset by every unkind word and sarcastic observation. We fail to ask ourselves the cardinal and most consoling question: on what basis has this dark censure been made? We treat with equal seriousness the objections of the critic who has thought rigorously and honestly and those of the critic who has acted out of misanthropy and envy.

We should take time to look behind the criticism. As Socrates had learned, the thinking at its basis, though carefully disguised, may be badly awry. Under the influence of passing moods, our critics may have fumbled towards conclusions. They may have acted from impulse and prejudice, and used their status to ennoble their hunches. They may have built up their thoughts like inebriated amateur potters.

But fortunately, unlike in pottery, it is initially extremely hard to tell a good product of thought from a poor one. It isn't difficult to identify the pot made by the inebriated craftsman and the one by the sober colleague.

A bad thought delivered authoritatively, though without evidence of how it was put together, can for a time carry all the weight of a sound one. But we acquire a misplaced respect for others when we concentrate solely on their conclusions - which is why Socrates urged us to dwell on the logic they used to reach them. Even if we cannot escape the consequences of opposition, we will at least be spared the debilitating sense of standing in error.

The idea had first emerged some time before the trial, during a conversation between Socrates and Polus, a well-known teacher of rhetoric visiting Athens from Sicily. Polus had some chilling political views, of whose truth he wished ardently to convince Socrates. The teacher argued that there was at heart no happier life for a human being than to be a dictator, for dictatorship enabled one to act as one pleased, to throw enemies in prison, confiscate their property and execute them.

Socrates listened politely, then answered with a series of logical arguments attempting to show that happiness lay in doing good. But Polus dug in his heels and affirmed his position by pointing out that dictators were often revered by huge numbers of people. He mentioned Archelaus, the king of Macedon, who had murdered his uncle, his cousin and a seven-year-old legitimate heir and yet continued to enjoy great public support in Athens. The number of people who liked Archelaus was a sign, concluded Polus, that his theory on dictatorship was correct.

Socrates courteously admitted that it might be very easy to find people who liked Archelaus, and harder to find anyone to support the view that doing good brought one happiness: 'If you feel like calling witnesses to claim that what I'm saying is wrong, you can count on your position being supported by almost everyone in Athens/' explained Socrates, 'whether they were born and bred

here or elsewhere.'

You'd have the support of Nicias the son of Niceratus, if you wanted, along with his brothers, who between them have a whole row of tripods standing in the precinct of Dionysus. You'd have the support of Aristocrates the son of Scellius as well. . . You could call on the whole of Pericles' household, if you felt like it, or any other Athenian family you care to choose.

But what Socrates zealously denied was that this widespread support for Polus's argument could on its own in any way prove it correct:

The trouble is, Polus, you're trying to use on me the kind of rhetorical refutation which people in lawcourts think is successful. There too people think they're proving the other side wrong if they produce a large number of eminent witnesses in support of the points they're making, when their opponent can only come up with a single witness or none at all. But this kind of reputation is completely worthless in the context of the truth, since it's perfectly possible for someone to be defeated in court by a horde of witnesses who have no more than apparent respectability and who all happen to testify against him.

True respectability stems not from the will of the majority but from proper reasoning. When we are making vases, we should listen to the advice of those who know about turning glaze into Fe₃O₄ at 800°C; when we are making a ship, it is the verdict of those who construct triremes that should worry us; and when we are considering ethical matters - how to be happy and courageous and just and good - we should not be intimidated by bad thinking, even if it issues from the lips of teachers of rhetoric, mighty generals and well-dressed aristocrats from Thessaly.

It sounded elitist, and it was. Not everyone is worth listening to. Yet Socrates' elitism had no trace of snobbery or prejudice. He might have discriminated in the views he attended, but the discrimination operated not on the basis of class or money, nor on the basis of military record or nationality, but on the basis of reason, which was - as he stressed - a faculty accessible to all.

To follow the Socratic example we should, when faced with criticism, behave like athletes training for the Olympic games. Information on sport was further supplied by *See Inside an Ancient Greek Town*.

Imagine we're athletes. Our trainer has suggested an exercise to strengthen our calves for the javelin. It requires us to stand on one leg and lift weights. It looks peculiar to outsiders, who mock and complain that we are throwing away our chances of success. In the baths, we overhear a man explain to another that we are

ϱ(iTv LieXel ^)Jiov TO x6. OXE^T| Kak^ ibu6eixvDvaL r\ TO poTiGeiv TT|7i6Xei Jigo^ Tf|v 6X'uuJiiovixT]v. (More interested in showing off a set of calf muscles than helping the city win the games.) Cruel, but no grounds for alarm if we listen to Socrates in conversation with his friend Crito:

SOCRATES: When a man is ... taking his training] seriously, does he pay attention to all praise and criticism and opinion indiscriminately, or only when it comes from the one qualified person, the actual doctor or trainer?

CRITO: Only when it comes from the one qualified person.

SOCRATES: Then he should be afraid of the criticism and welcome the praise of the one qualified person, but not those of the general public.

CRITO: Obviously.

SOCRATES: He ought to regulate his actions and exercises and eating and drinking by the Judgement of his instructor, who has expert knowledge, not by the opinions of the rest of the public.

The value of criticism will depend on the thought processes of critics, not on their number or rank:

Don't you think it a good principle that one shouldn't respect all human opinions, but only some and not others . . . that one should respect the good ones, but not the bad ones?... And good ones are those of people with understanding, whereas bad ones are those of people without it...

So my good friend, we shouldn't care all that much about what the populace will say of us, but about what the expert on matters of justice and injustice will say.

The jurors on the benches of the Court of the Heliasts were no experts. They included an unusual number of the old and the war-wounded, who looked to jury work as an easy source of additional income. The salary was three obols a day, less than a manual labourer's, but helpful if one was sixty-three and bored at home.

The only qualifications were citizenship, a sound mind and an absence of debts - though soundness of mind was not judged by Socratic criteria, more the ability to walk in a straight line and produce one's name when asked. Members of the jury fell asleep during trials, rarely had experience of similar cases or relevant laws, and were given no guidance on how to reach verdicts.

Socrates' own jury had arrived with violent prejudices. They had been influenced by Aristophanes' caricature of Socrates, and felt that the philosopher had played a role in the disasters that had befallen the once-mighty city at the end of the century. The Peloponnesian War had finished in catastrophe, a Spartan-Persian alliance had brought Athens to her knees, the city had been blockaded, her fleet destroyed and her empire dismembered. Plagues had broken out in poorer districts, and democracy had been suppressed by a dictatorship guilty of executing a thousand citizens. For Socrates' enemies, it was more than coincidence that many of the dictators had once spent time with the philosopher. Critias and Charmides had discussed ethical matters with Socrates, and it seemed all they had acquired as a result was a lust for murder.

What could have accounted for Athens's spectacular fall from grace? Why had the greatest city in Hellas, which seventy-five years before had defeated the Persians on land at Plataea and at sea at Mycale, been forced to endure a succession of humiliations? The man in the dirty cloak who wandered the streets asking the obvious seemed one ready, entirely flawed explanation.

Socrates understood that he had no chance. He lacked even the time to make a case. Defendants had only minutes to address a jury, until the water had run from one jar to another in the court clock:

I am convinced that I never wronged anyone intentionally, but I cannot convince you of this, because we have so little time for discussion. If it was your practice, as it is with other nations, to give not one day but several to the hearing of capital trials, I believe that you might have been convinced; but under present conditions it is not so easy to dispose of grave allegations in a short space of time.

An Athenian courtroom was no forum for the discovery of the truth. It was a rapid encounter with a collection of the aged and one-legged who had not submitted their beliefs to rational examination and were waiting for the water to run from one jar to the other.

It must have been difficult to hold this in mind, it must have required the kind of strength accrued during years in conversation with ordinary Athenians: the strength, under certain circumstances, not to take the views of others seriously. Socrates was not wilful, he did not dismiss these views out of misanthropy, which would have contravened his faith in the potential for rationality in every human being. But he had been up at dawn for most of his life talking to Athenians; he knew how their minds worked and had seen that unfortunately they frequently didn't, even if he hoped they would some day. He had observed their tendency to take positions on a whim and to follow accepted opinions -without questioning them. It wasn't arrogance to keep this before him at a moment of supreme opposition.

He possessed the self-belief of a rational man who understands that his enemies are liable not to be thinking properly, even if he is far from claiming that his own thoughts are invariably sound. Their disapproval could kill him; it did not have to make him wrong.

Of course, he might have renounced his philosophy and saved his life. Even after he had been found guilty, he could have escaped the death penalty, but wasted the opportunity through intransigence. We should not look to Socrates for advice on escaping a death sentence; we should look to him as an extreme example of how to maintain confidence in an intelligent position which has met with illogical opposition.

The philosopher's speech rose to an emotional finale:

If you put me to death, you will not easily find anyone to take my place. The fact is, if I may put the point in a somewhat comical way, that I have been literally attached by God to our city, as though it were a large thoroughbred horse which because of its great size is inclined to be lazy and needs the stimulation of a gadfly . . . If you take my advice you will spare my life, I suspect, however, that before long you will awake from your drowsing, and in your annoyance you will take Anytus's advice and finish me off with a single slap; and then you will go on sleeping.

He was not mistaken. When the magistrate called for a second, final verdict, 360 members of the jury voted for the philosopher to be put to death. The jurors went home; the condemned man was escorted to prison.

It must have been dark and close, and the sounds coming up from the street would have included jeers from Athenians anticipating the end of the satyr-faced thinker. He would have been killed at

once had the sentence not coincided with the annual Athenian mission to Delos. during which, tradition decreed, the city could not put anyone to death. Socrates' good nature attracted the sympathy of the prison warder, who alleviated his last days by allowing him to receive visitors. A stream of them came; Phaedo, Crito, Crito's son Critobulus, Apollodorus, Hermogenes, Epigenes, Aeschines, Anrithenes, Ctesippus, Menexenus, Simmias, Cebes, Phaedondas, Euclides and Terpsion. They could not disguise their distress at seeing a man who had only ever displayed great kindness and curiosity towards others waiting to meet his end like a criminal.

Though David's canvas presented Socrates surrounded by devastated friends, we should remember that their devotion stood out in a sea of misunderstanding and hatred.

To counterpoint the mood in the prison cell and introduce variety, Diderot might have urged a few of the many prospective-hemlock painters to capture the mood of other Athenians at the idea of Socrates' death - which might have resulted in paintings with titles like Five Jurors Playing Cards after a Day in Cowl or The Accusers Finishing Dinner and Looking Forward to Bed. A painter with a taste for pathos could more plainly have chosen to title these scenes The Death of Socrates,

When the appointed day came, Socrates was alone in remaining calm. His wife and three children were brought to see him, but Xanthippe's cries were so hysterical, Socrates asked that she be ushered away. His friends were quieter though no less tearful. Even the prison warder, who had seen many go to their deaths, was moved to address an awkward farewell:

'In your time here, I've known you to be die most generous and gentlest and best of men who have ever come to this place . . . You know the message I've come to bring: goodbye, then, and try to bear the inevitable as easily as you can.' And with this he turned away in tears and went off.

Then came the executioner, bearing a cup of crushed hemlock:

When he saw the man Socrates said: 'Well, my friend, you're an expert in these things: what must one do?' 'Simply drink it,' he said, 'and walk about till a heaviness comes over your legs; then lie down, and it will act by itself.' And with this he held out the cup to Socrates. He took it perfectly calmly . . . without a tremor or any change of colour or countenance . . . He pressed the cup to his lips, and drank it off with good humour and without th'i - least dis-

taste. Till then most of us had been able to restrain our tears fairly well [narrated by Phaedo]; but when we saw he was drinking, that he'd actually drunk it, we could do so no longer. In my own case, the tears came pouring out in spite of myself.. . Even before me, Crito had moved away when he was unable to restrain his tears. And Apollodorus, who even earlier had been continuously in tears, now burst forth into such a storm of weeping and grieving, that he made everyone present break down except Socrates himself.

The philosopher implored his companions to calm themselves - 'What a way to behave, my strange friends!' he mocked - then stood up and walked around the prison cell so the poison could take effect. When his legs began to feel heavy, he lay down on his back and the sensation left his feet and legs; as the poison moved upwards and reached his chest, he gradually lost consciousness. His breathing became slow. Once he saw that his best friend's eyes had grown fixed, Crito reached over and closed them:

And that [said Phaedo] . . . was the end of our companion, who was, we can fairly say, of all those of his time whom we knew, the bravest and also the wisest and most upright man.

It is hard not to start crying oneself. Perhaps because Socrates is said to have had a bulbous head and peculiar widely-spaced eyes, the scene of his death made me think of an afternoon on which I had wept while watching a tape of The Elephant Man.

It seemed that both men had suffered one of the saddest of fates - to be good and yet judged evil.

We might never have been jeered at for a physical deformity, nor condemned to death for our life's work, but there is something universal! in the scenario of being misunderstood of which these stories are tragic, consummate examples. Social life is beset with disparities between others' perceptions of us and our reality. We are accused of stupidity when we are being cautious. Our shyness is taken for arrogance and our desire to please for sycophancy. We struggle to clear up a misunderstanding, but our throat goes dry and the words found are not the ones meant. Bitter enemies are appointed to positions of power over us, and denounce us to others. In the hatred unfairly directed towards an innocent philosopher we recognize an echo of the hurt we ourselves encounter at the hands of those who are either unable or unwilling to do us justice.

But there is redemption in the story, too. Soon after the philoso-

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