

Viki Mladenova | Socrates in Quarantine

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One death has proven to be exceptionally devastating for Western politics and philosophy, as well as for political philosophy - and has left its mark on life in the city (*polis*).¹ Socrates' death illustrates many philosophical, political, and ethical themes, strong impressions of many debates, and deep insights into two complex matters that can be observed in their restless omnipresence from antiquity to the present day: common living (or the existence of the community) and the living of a singular self (or singular existence). Through the reconstruction of Socrates' final moments, by using Plato's dialogue *Phaedo* in this case, and in light of the current pandemic of the COVID-19 virus, among other things, two strong elements of life

¹ Previously, a longer version of the text was published in Macedonian on the web platform *Okno* (April 23, 2020). <https://okno.mk/node/84114>; and an adjusted and shortened version was also published in Greek by the Institute for Alternative Policies (June 17, 2020). <https://www.enainstitute.org/o-σωκράτης-σε-καραντίνα>.

in the city emerge - dialogue and friendship. In his last moments, Socrates did not discuss Athens, or life in the *polis*, or the Athenians - the usual sources of his questions and his art of midwifery (i.e., the Socratic method), his final breath that can still be felt, perhaps now better than ever, carried his last wish - that his friends take care of themselves, because if they do not, that would mean the end of the dialogues they had. This fusion of the care of the self and dialogue actually reveals how mutual dependency between singular and common living is possible, and why, in fact, it is necessary.

Dialogue

Socrates introduces dialogue as an ethical, political and ontological means that creates and then is contained in a series of signs that point to an active life: thinking, speech and action. In the current pandemic, the three elements in this sequence can be examined in two places (*topoi*), which the strict legal provisions in this period allow, that is, *to be* at home and *to be* outside. "Home" is an ambiguous feature of space, it is difficult to define, and should be constantly attached to the distaste for widely accepted, codified images; but the house or the apartment in which one feels at home has one constant trait - it confines the outside world and its abundance. "The word 'house' is something like a frozen thought that thinking must unfreeze whenever it wants to find out the original meaning."² Although there are two conflicting aspects of thinking while staying at home, by following Socrates' legacy of dialogue and friendship, they, in an unexpected way, finally harmonize and bring out the first element of what we previously described as a series of signs of active life: thinking in the form of a dialogue, a dialogue that contains the plurality of the human condition at anytime. Thus, thinking can take place, if I have someone else by my side, above all, someone shaped through and derived from the abundance of the world, from the countless and contingent possibilities for making friends and building relationships, and all the stimuli and affective experiences that follow; and vice versa - their (re-)examination, which will then reveal the platform of thinking as a verb, i.e., the first sign of active life. Hence, thinking can happen at least in this case, I-with-me or two-in-one, where the world and the other person that the world

² Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 173.

has given to me, and I, are contained together in the “two,” and where, at the same time, they make room for me to conduct a side in the dialogue or for my position in the “one,” following the scheme I-with-another-with-me. Prompted by a meeting with his friend and teacher Socrates, Plato uses the term *dialegethai* for the word dialogue, which actually appeals to a “traveling through words.” But living with oneself, thinking in the I-with-me form of dialogue, has one precondition: living with others, in the realm of the political, in the public space. Thus, one who can live with oneself is presumed to be able to live with others:

The self, too, is a kind of friend. The guiding experience in these matters is, of course, friendship and not selfhood; I first talk with others before I talk with myself, examining whatever the joint talk may have been about, and then discover that I can conduct a dialogue not only with others, but with myself as well. The common point, however, is that the dialogue of thought can be carried out only among friends...³

The latter reminds us that the walls of the quarantine-home will not withstand the pressure of the ability to think dialogically, to look for conversations taking place outside, in the world, facing the world and being exposed to perspectives of us in return, between friends where all questions start (even the most basic one among them: “Who am I?”), noting that it is not enough only to “be”, but also to “appear”, in the world as such. “This possibility is of the greatest relevance to politics, if we understand (as the Greeks understood) the polis as the public-political realm in which men attain their full humanity, their full reality as men, not only because they *are* (as in the privacy of the household) but also because they *appear*.”⁴ But even Socrates had to return from his favorite place in the city - the square - to his house in Athens, and be alone and away from the others. In light of the measures against the spread of the COVID-19 virus, what emerges from the practice of staying at home, and is a key point to thinking in the form of dialogue, is solitude. Before I appear in the world, I have to appear before myself. In fact, in a do-

mestic condition,⁵ I can reach from one for two, let the two-in-one dialogue pierce through me in order to reach again the plurality of humanity to which I belong. When the so-called “discourse within the soul” takes place, I am the one who asks and answers the questions, so that duality makes thinking a true activity. To put it in Arendtian terms again: “Nothing perhaps indicates more strongly that man exists essentially in the plural than that his solitude actualizes his merely being conscious of himself.”⁶ This reveals a sweet paradox of the dialogue - the opposite natures of the political arena and the solitude which harmonize in the two-in-one formula. The reason behind the deep dissatisfaction with the measures points to the home walls-confines that cannot stand upright facing the outside if they are not touching the inside of the world. We must be free to move along all possible points of the axis with two ends: in and out. Moving along this axis is not that safe though. This becomes evident when the fear of another threat to health, that is, mental health, suggests a cry for something that would be defined as a “theory of care.” One heavy sigh barely mutters, “I am in default of myself” (*ich bleibe mir aus*); when solitude no longer is the context, but thinking in dialogue is dominated by loneliness, a new dangerous situation arises where “I am one and without company.”

Friendship

“Abbandonarsi alla solitudine del pensiero sulla pubblica piazza. Che impresa pericolosa!” (“Abandon oneself to the solitude of thought at a public square. What a dangerous endeavor!”⁷) The other two elements of the series of signs of active life, in addition to thinking, are speech and action, and they are performed from the sphere of the private, at home or in solitude, but they also necessarily transfer the capacity for dialogue to the realm of the political and the public sphere, the political arena. Given the structure of the two-in-one dialogue, it is already clear that friendship is the driving force of speech, which, in the public sphere, becomes a set of countless voices and the differences they contain. Namely, access to speech

⁵ Elettra Stimilli, “Being in Common at a Distance,” trans. by Greg Bird, *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* (March 20, 2020). <https://www.utpjournals.press/journals/topia/being-in-common-at-a-distance>.

⁶ Arendt, *Life*, 185.

⁷ Donatella Di Cesare, *Sulla vocazione politica della filosofia* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2018), 49. Trans. by the author.

³ Arendt, *Life*, 189.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

and having a voice always presupposes the existence of a friend who supports the structure of dialogue. Speech is not possible if it is not addressed in duality, translated as the beginning of the plurality of the human condition. We live together when every encounter is simultaneously a request for no one to be neglected; everyone can be a potential friend because her voice will become one with the dialogue I have with others and with myself. Without the voice of the other, my voice also disappears from the public sphere. The value of friendship, in this sense, is generalized, it spills out of the intimate boundaries of sharing and investing in a micro-world of togetherness - namely, the intimate friendship assumes its form only after the public sphere becomes equipped with countless combinations of encounters, contingents of contacts, heterogeneous views and insights into other and unknown vital dynamics, which in turn affects our own life stories, when, finally, all this together enables the ability to think, to formulate speech and materialize action. Given the entrenched inequality and unbearable stratification we encounter in the world, the community has a chance to establish its own existence, *to be* that - a community - precisely through friendship:

The community comes into being through equalizing, *isasthēnai* ... The political, noneconomic equalization is friendship, *philia* ... [Socrates] therefore ultimately sees friendship from the viewpoint of the single citizen, not from that of the polis: the supreme justification of friendship is that nobody would choose to live without friends even though he possessed all other goods ... The equalization in friendship does not of course mean that the friends become the same or equal to each other, but rather that they become equal partners in a common world - that they together constitute a community.⁸

So, what happens to friendship in such cases where the countless combinations of encounters and appearances in the world become clogged in a mathematically precise and incriminating ambience like "... gathering in public places and areas of more than two people (for grouping over five people together to be considered a crime

and to have criminal responsibility)"?⁹ What happens to friendship when a new political figure is introduced into the political arena, that of the possibly contagious individual, which, acting as an extension of the enemy, will turn the health status into a key political determinant? What happens to the contingent contacts which contain the timeless abundance of the world within themselves, if social distancing becomes the new norm for common life? The fear of the touch of the other can be dangerously equated with the fear of the new society. Namely, what will happen next, which is anxiously and hopefully intertwined in the phrase, "nothing will ever be the same again," is likely to raise a new front: the official truth spread by the centers of power and capital will build on the fear of the touch of the other, and the dark political spikes of right-wing and authoritarian populism will not treat the other side gently; which in order to survive must necessarily be guided by the principles of friendship, dialogue and care, of interdependence and its material and bodily provability, of vulnerability as a renewed position of resistance. The new society, in this sense, will not be really that new.

Rooster

Following a lengthy debate with intimate pleas to consider another solution besides drinking the poison, Socrates concludes by reminding his companions that he owes Aesculapius a rooster, and asks Crito to return it in his name. These "ridiculous and terrible" last words, as Friedrich Nietzsche says, were not accidental and reveal something unexpected about the life that Socrates lived, which we could imagine was led in the full splendor of active life. Aesculapius is an ancient god of medicine, and this, according to Nietzsche, means that Socrates suffered, namely, that his last words were in fact: "O, Crito, *life is a disease*."¹⁰ Life is a disease, the full splendor of active life is by no means devoid of suffering. The choice to die over any other option, even that of escape, which should not be immediately ruled out considering Socrates' experience of being a foreigner, migrating in and out of the rules of living in his own city, that is, the

⁹ "Decision of the Government of Republic of North Macedonia from the 44th Government Session," *Government of Republic of North Macedonia* (April 18, 2020). <https://vlada.mk/node/21099>.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 272.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 17.

experience of *a-topia*;¹¹ this choice is an indication that the sickness represents a context in which active life sometimes takes place. If Nietzsche's interpretation is as sound as it is intriguing, it means that the life that takes place in the city is already sick, that the sickness had spread before the pandemic, because the city configures a life with illnesses that are chronic: unprotected workers in cramped and crowded factories—conditions that preceded the strictest COVID-19 related measures; old people who act as waste for human capital, forgotten in the waiting rooms of death, that is, the nursing homes; the poor who have been neglected and have not yet heard the bad news about their so-called compromised immune systems; the marginalized communities whose ghettos are now behind quarantine bars. If the disease had already been rampant in the city, this specific virus should not be abused by the state apparatus. Namely, the overall *dispositif*, in order to promote in a less discreet way than before, and under false pretenses, the immunitary paradigm as the official context from which rules are derived that dictate in which way life will be allowed to proceed. The immunitary paradigm is now being reflected in the phrase "saving lives." We should be extremely careful when there are formal intentions to take over the care of life. If getting out of a pandemic means entering into a new order of life that needs to be saved, it is important to pay attention to a few things. The organized response to the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have the effects of a *pharmakon*: it is one-part medicine for the health emergency caused by the virus, and one-part political poison:

If life - which in all its forms is the object of immunization - cannot be preserved except by placing something inside it that subtly contradicts it, we must infer that the preservation of life corresponds with a form of restriction that somehow separates it from itself ... To allow the community to withstand the entropic risk that threatens it, and with which it ultimately coincides, it must be sterilized of its own relational contents.¹²

Immunization (*immunitas*) and community (*communitas*) are in a surprising way both linked to the same singular root - *munus*, a gift.

Considering that in the most generic sense a community means giving a gift, participating in the communal life through (self-)giving, and at the same time, given the fact that immunization implies the cessation of this social exchange - the person who is immunized is excluded from this social exchange and cannot give nor receive a gift. In this sense, immunization is not established as an antonym of the community, the gift is not missing because the need for immunization has been imposed, but because the members of the community cannot take part in it at all if they do not support the social exchange, such as giving, with all the risk it carries. The resistance to the immunitary paradigm is not a misguided attempt to reject the suppression, cure and actions that would make COVID-19 less risky, but it is a resistance to a disease that has already attacked active life, as already elaborated. Here we should remind ourselves of the words of Des Esseintes, the protagonist of Karl Huysmans' novel *À rebours*, who, without being forced to do so by a pandemic locked himself away and who at the end of the description of his so-called world for himself, in his house in Fontaine, exclaims: "Collapse society: die, old world!" (*Croule donc, société! Meurs donc, vieux monde!*)

¹¹ See more at Di Cesare, *Sulla vocazione*.

¹² Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. by Zakiya Hanafi (London: Polity, 2011), 8, 13.