Socrates and Obedience

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I. The problem

Students of Plato have long puzzled over what seems to be a contradiction in the views expressed by Socrates in *Apology* and *Crito*. In *Apology*, Socrates asserts:

(I) I shall not give up philosophy, even if the city commands me to do so. (*Ap. 29 d*)

But in *Crito*, Socrates asserts or implies:

(II) Every citizen (including myself) should obey every command of the city. (*Cr. 50 a-53 a*)

From these two claims, it follows fairly straightforwardly that Socrates will give up philosophy and will not give up philosophy, if the city commands him to give up philosophy.

This contradiction has called forth two responses from commentators:

1 This reading rests upon the crucial phrase πείσομαι δὲ μᾶλλον τῷ θεῷ ἣ υμῖν... οὐ μὴ πείσομαι φιλοσοφῶν 29 d 3-5, which makes it clear (i) that Socrates is envisioning a conflict between what the city says and what the god says, for otherwise he would not have to obey one rather than (μᾶλλον... ἥ...) the other; (ii) that therefore Socrates must be supposing the city to have told him to do something that requires him to disobey the god, and this, as the context makes clear, is to cease doing philosophy — it is not, as 29 c 5-dl might otherwise suggest, either to cease philosophy or to submit to death; (iii) that Socrates will obey or be persuaded by the god, hence will not be persuaded by (will disobey) the city — note the emphatic double negative. Of course the city never actually commands Socrates to give up philosophy.

2 For evidence of this claim in *Crito*, see note 18.

3 The derivation requires two further assumptions: Roughly, that Socrates will do what he says in (I) he will do, and that Socrates will do what he should do.

4 It is not strictly speaking a contradiction, for it has the form 'If P, then Q and not-Q.' But since it is possible that P, it follows that it is also possible that Q and not-Q, and this follows whether or not the city ever actually commands Socrates to give up philosophy. So Socrates seems at least committed to the position that it is possible that both Q and not-Q, even though he may never be confronted with the problem of both giving up and not giving up philosophy, both at the same time. Even if Socrates is not guilty of believing a contradiction, he surely seems to hold that an inconsistent proposition (Q and not-Q) is consistent, which is bad enough. To simplify matters, I shall talk throughout this paper as though we were dealing with a contradiction.
(1) The contradiction between (I) and (II) is merely verbal or apparent; that is, Socrates is not really contradicting himself in asserting (I) and (II), because he has in mind a qualification of either (I) or (II) [usually (II) is picked for this role], which has the effect of limiting the applicability of (I) to one set of cases, and the applicability of (II) to a wholly different set of cases, so that (I) and (II) could never both apply to the same situation.

(2) The contradiction between (I) and (II) is not merely apparent; it is ineluctable. No reconciliation between (I) and (II) is possible, and Socrates holds contradictory views.

But neither (1) nor (2) is satisfactory. (1) is unsatisfactory because none of the distinctions purported to resolve the contradiction between (I) and (II) can be found in either of the dialogues, at least in such a way as to indicate that Socrates would use them to resolve the contradiction. All the variants of view (1) thus far suggested, to my knowledge, impose upon Socrates a position he did not hold, so far as our evidence shows. Unfortunately, to reject (1) seems to be to embrace (2), and (2) has decidedly unpleasant consequences. For (2) ascribes to Plato – or at least to Socrates – an inconsistency so obvious and bothersome that it is hard to believe that Plato and/or Socrates could have overlooked it, or, if they did not overlook it, could have left it standing.

Now (1) and (2) agree on one crucial assumption: That the two dialogues are meant to be literal expressions of the views of Plato and/or Socrates. Both views restrict themselves to considering what Socrates says in the dialogues – his very words – and both views assume that when Socrates says something in either dialogue, he (or Plato) means it, i.e. he (or Plato) believes that it is true – with the exception of a few obvious jokes and ironies, such as his statement, at the start of Apology, that his accusers spoke so persuasively that they almost persuaded him. In other words, both (1) and (2) agree in taking (I) and (II) to be assertions that Socrates regards as true;


6 Thus Howard Zinn, in Disobedience and Democracy (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 28: ‘We forget that Plato was not a democrat, and that Socrates violates in the Crito that spirit he showed in the Apology, at his trial.’

7 See note 19 for an illustration of this difficulty as it arises in Woozley’s account.