Socrates’s Assault on the Ivory Tower

Joseph P. Lawrence


In his poem “Frühling der Seele,” Georg Trakl writes of a humanity whose own discordant and incongruous yearnings burden it with the severest of bequests. There Trakl writes: “the soul is a stranger upon the earth.”¹ With this enigmatic utterance Trakl gives voice to a truth that is less a pronouncement about some final human identity than it is a call or summons to rethink the very project of what it means to be human. It is in our strangeness, Trakl seems to say, that we begin our circuitous journey upon the earth. Strangeness in this sense should not be understood as a momentary reaction to an unsettling or disaffecting condition that suddenly comes upon us; rather, it comes to us as an irremediable endowment that marks our every venture in factical life. It is precisely this element of strangeness that, as Martin Heidegger has put it, “shows the soul the path of its essential being.”² What this strangeness denotes, and how such strangeness comes to shape the very standing of the human being in the world, constitutes one of the oldest questions that besets philosophical thinking. Going back to Sophocles’s *Antigone* chorus, we find the human being characterized as δεινός—that uncanny, terrible, fearful, marvelous, alarming, and strange being who is stranger than all other beings (δεινότατον). As both awesome and aw(e)ful, it is this being who, as the chorus sings, “stops at nothing” to assert its mastery over an uncertain and threatening world of natural forces.³ In Sophocles’s words, this strangeness is combined with “a cunning ingenuity that exceeds all hope” (v. 365) such that strangeness comes to dwell with excess as its intimate consort. It is in this domain of strangeness that Joseph P. Lawrence tries to situate the whole enterprise of philosophical inquiry.

² Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache, Gesamtausgabe* 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1985), 77.
In Lawrence’s strange and affecting book, *Socrates Among Strangers*, we come face-to-face with a philosopher whose very way of being offers a challenge to our usual understanding of philosophy, both as an academic field of study and as a way of life. In this early Greek philosopher, Lawrence finds a model for his own efforts to understand what philosophy is and what it purports to be. For him, Socrates is the consummate stranger, the one who is not at home in Athens, not at home in any academy, not at home in his domestic routines and, above all, not at home within himself. As “the perennial outsider” (15)—barefoot, coarse, unkempt, and physically repellent—he comes to personify a certain kind of philosophical detachment from the expectations of others. In this way, by embracing his “strikingly ugly and distinctly ... portly [appearance],” he comes to understand himself as the compelling figure he truly is. Freed from the social norms of Athenian conformity, Lawrence’s “Socrates” becomes free for the serious pursuit of self-transformation that lies at the root of all philosophical inquiry. As the stranger, Socrates remains intent on resisting the impulse to accommodate himself to what the πόλις deems suitable. For generations this image of Socratic independence and resistance has conferred upon him a unique status as a kind of philosophical hero, an Odysseus-figure who cunningly navigates a return back to his home after a series of trials and missteps. And if most commentators define Socrates’s heroic traits in terms of his Odysseus-like courage, cunning, determination, and resourcefulness, Lawrence locates it elsewhere: in Socrates’s incessant struggle with the possibility of his own monstrousness. At root, Lawrence tells us, Socrates’s heroic stance—which is inseparable from his strangeness—lies in his ability (and willingness) to pursue the project of self-examination to its most radical limits. The source for such a reading Lawrence finds in the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates claims: “I inquire into myself. For me the question is whether I happen to be a monster more complex in form and more savage than Typhon, or whether I am a tamer, simpler animal to whom nature has apportioned a divine and un-Typhonic share” (*Phaedrus* 230a). We find traces of this same suspicion in *The Republic* (572b) where Socrates admits, “there is some terrible (δεινόν), savage, and lawless brood of desire in every human, even in those who seem to be measured individuals.” It is in this most proper sense that Socrates appears in the dialogue as ἄνομος: that is, outside of the law, contrary to convention, beset by an anomic so fierce that it serves as both the spur and the seed for the most exacting form of self-scrutiny.

On the basis of this reading of Socrates as “the stranger,” Lawrence comes to position him in two distinctive ways: first, as a model for the human being who stands as the strangest of all possible creatures—hence, the title: Socrates “among” strangers. Here we are to understand that all human beings are