

CLASSICS

Liberation: A Socratic and Ignatian Approach

Thomas E. Strunk Ph.D.

Mentor: Steve Yandell, Ph.D. (English)

The Ignatian Mentoring Program gave me an opportunity to think about my Plato course (Greek 203) in a much broader manner than I otherwise would have done. In addition, I was able to meet with Steve Yandell, a colleague from another department, who gave me sage advice on structuring my course and often presented ideas I would not have considered. As part of my preparation for this course, and in addition to my readings on Plato and Socrates, I read widely from the anthologies *A Jesuit Education Reader* and *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*. These readings gave me a stronger foundation in Ignatian pedagogy and spirituality. To gain a better understanding of Jesuit Catholic liberation, I read *Jesus the Liberator* and *Where Is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope* by Jon Sobrino and *A Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutiérrez.

I chose my Greek 203 course because Plato's texts surrounding the trial and death of Socrates raise some of the seminal questions in understanding what it means to be human. This course focused on reading Plato's *Apology* in Greek and the *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo* in English. Therefore, we explored the life, trial, imprisonment, and death of Socrates. We closely read our Greek texts with an eye on grammatical, syntactical, and stylistic matters as is always needed in a Greek course. We also examined the political, social, and philosophic context surrounding the trial of Socrates. Students were asked to read modern scholarship on the life and death of Socrates, give an in-class presentation informed by such reading on a topic of the student's choosing after consultation with me, and then write a 5-7 page paper. This much of the course was fairly standard for a Greek class of this kind.

As the Platonic works surrounding the trial and death of Socrates paradoxically focus on Socrates' liberation from the political, spiritual, and intellectual restraints of his society, an important theme that we examined throughout the semester was liberation: intellectual, spiritual, and political, that is liberation through philosophy, religious thought, and history. We can trace the origins of the liberal arts back to the ancient Greeks, especially Socrates and Plato. Since these studies are intended to be liberating, we have explored what this might mean for us. How might we be liberated intellectually, politically, and spiritually by coming into contact with such writings and ideas? Moreover, as we undertake our liberal studies at a Jesuit institution, we also must consider what liberation means in a Jesuit/Ignatian context. Are there special demands put upon us as members of such an institution to bring about our own spiritual liberation? Are there also demands upon us to participate in the liberation of the oppressed?

Our method for exploring these ideas were both Socratic and Ignatian. In order to spur reflection on liberation and the life and death of Socrates, students journaled throughout the semester. In these journal reflections, students interrogated themselves as Socrates would to gain a clearer concept of what liberation might mean and look like. But we also proceeded by an Ignatian use of the imagination, that is the application of senses, to see from all sides (prosecution, defense, and jury) ourselves in the courtroom where Socrates was condemned, in the prison where Socrates was held, and the room where Socrates was executed surrounded by his disciples. Through this application of our senses, I wanted students to gain greater insight into the experience of Socrates and his associates. For these journal reflections where students used their imagination, I did not emphasize matters of historical accuracy and authenticity but rather the need to get into the emotional space of a courtroom, a prison cell and so on. In the belief that *cura personalis* starts with the self, I also prompted students to examine their lives as Greek students, as people who are at a Jesuit institution, and as individuals who are called to find God (Beauty for those less theistically inclined) in all things.

In addition to our journaling, students sought out other literary, political, and artistic examples in addition to Socrates and St. Ignatius, which point towards liberation. The findings of our investigations culminated in a 5-7 page paper and an oral presentation in class. In this paper and presentation, students analyzed a literary or artistic work that spoke to the theme of liberation. This was liberation broadly construed: philosophic, political, spiritual. The paper topics selected by the students came from various times, places, and media. Students needed to explain the historical and social context in which the work was created. They also needed to address the author/artist's goals in creating the piece, the audience for which the piece was created, and its effectiveness at reaching that audience. Lastly, they were asked to consider how the literary/artistic creation spoke to our own liberation. That is, explicitly, what do Plato and Ignatius have to say to us today?

Journal Prompts with Sample Student Reflections

1. **Existential Reflection:** Where are you? How is it all going? How and why are you here at a Jesuit institution studying the liberal arts and Greek specifically? You should not have simple one-word, one-sentence answers to these questions. If you do, you need to ask why again until you get another, deeper answer.

“I’m sitting in my bed writing, but I think not answering the question right. I’m sixteen, working a low paying job, going to Xavier to attend a class on Plato. People think I’m smart for taking college courses, but I’m still learning to use this pen. I’m Catholic, I go to church when I can, I volunteer often in ministries. But, over all that, I’m not sure what my life is for. What am I here to do? How can I make my life mean more? How do I help the world with what I do when it isn’t that big a deal? Is it one of those things where little things build up to big things? Where one action makes another action come into place? I don’t know. Most likely humans aren’t supposed to know what it all means.”

2. **Euthyphro:** Imagine yourself as Euthyphro having just finished a conversation with Socrates. How do you feel about yourself? Refreshed, empowered, enlightened, confused, angry, etc.? How do you feel about Socrates? Where are you going when you leave Socrates? What do you see, hear, smell? What are your plans regarding your father? Feel free to address all or some of the above or add your own observations and thoughts.

“Maybe people can’t be holy? Or maybe acts? No, that can’t be . . . But is it the case that everything is either holy or unholy or are only certain things such? Why am I asking myself so many questions now?! Why am I suddenly so doubtful of my knowledge of the gods and holiness? This must be the reason why Socrates has been accused of corrupting the youth - he is not a teacher of truth but an inspirer of doubt. He is destructive.”

3. **On Liberation:** What does the word conjure up for you? Think of some examples of liberation from your own life, history, art, etc. Provide a definition of liberation. What are some strengths and weaknesses of this definition? What is the difference between liberation and emancipation, human rights, freedom, or even personal development and personal growth? Why are the liberal arts called liberal? What is the role of classics in the liberal arts? What is the connection between literature and the arts and political or spiritual liberation?

“The liberal arts teach us how to use our own intellect to form our own ideas, or combat another’s. This can occur in any of the liberal arts subjects, but I find that the languages free the text of the ancients from any bias that the translation might have. I particularly remember in high school translating the Gospel of Mark, and although the words could be translated as they are recognized in the Bible, they were not quite the same. This is why the Jesuits study the Liberal Arts. Because we have the tools to reach full understanding, but we need the desire and the knowledge to achieve this.”

4. **The Jury:** Imagine yourself in the Athenian courtroom as a jurist listening to Socrates. Of course you will want to consider how you will cast your ballot, at least up to this point in the defense. But also consider the sounds you hear, the crowd of people gathered around you. What do your senses notice? What are other people doing? How does all this impress you? What do you see the prosecutors and defendants doing? Remember, write in the first person.

“Since I woke up today, there has been a tense vibe in the air, hanging and weighing down everything. It could be the heat or my stress over being a juror, but everything seems to bear down on me. As I walk the streets, I see the eyes on me, the murmurs of the people, and the half-hidden fingers pointing at me in the middle of whispers. The city is tense, and the people are certainly feeling the intensity. Everywhere I go, people seem to be talking about the case, and the significance of the decision of the jury. And that is why all eyes are on me.”

5. **Life as a Greek Student:** How are you doing as a Greek student? Not are you getting As and Bs, but how does it feel to you, outside of class? What tedium and drudgery do you experience as a Greek student? What do you find liberating about your Greek studies? As students at a Jesuit university we are charged with finding God in all things, so where do you find the divine in your Greek studies? If you want to be less theocentric, then where do you find Beauty in your Greek studies?

“I do try to find God in everything, and Greek is no different. I find tremendous value in the classics as a whole. They teach me how to think critically and have an appreciation for things of the past.”

"I find beauty in every bit of Greek that I come across. Every verb, every adjective, and every noun. The way the words work together to form some of the best stories. . . Greek is an enjoyable painstaking labor. It brings joy and frustration to me every day, but I couldn't imagine it any other way."

"One of the things I enjoy so much about it is the communal translation of the class. It almost feels like these texts were meant to be read with others; and we are afforded the opportunity to do so in great company. . . Certainly one way in which I find God in my Greek studies is in the community aspect that I have been talking about."

"Greek and I have an interesting relationship. I have to struggle to get through it, but I do think that I have come a long way since the first Greek class as a freshman. I sometimes actually enjoy translating by myself because it's kind of like solving a puzzle. Greek is not something I ever thought I would be studying, but now that I am I really see the benefit. . . . Greek forces me to focus and really work hard for the first time in my life. But I really do see the value in the study. In my other classes, especially in theology, philosophy, and history classes. I feel that all of these classes including Greek have really opened my eyes to how the world is."

"I find beauty in Greek in seeing the explanations behind words, or deriving their meaning. I wish I could be exposed to more of this!! I know that the more I study Greek though the better able I will be to notice these things on my own."

6. The Prosecution: Imagine yourself as one of Socrates prosecutors. How do you feel going in front of the jury? How do you feel about confronting and being confronted by Socrates? Are you nervous, afraid, or filled with energy? What are your misgivings? But even more mundane: what are you wearing, how did you get to the courthouse, did you eat anything or meet anyone in the street beforehand?

"I should have seen it coming. I should have known it would end this way. Just this very morning somebody random walked up to Anytus and I heading over to court, and started asking us what we were doing. Anytus launches into his spiel, saying, "Meletus and I are bringing suit against that apostate Socrates." "Oh my, an apostate? What are the charges?" the stranger said. "Well, there are two," replied Anytus, before launching into an explanation. I didn't even know this stranger, and still I was embarrassed. I just want to be a good friend to Anytus; I didn't want to get sucked into this crap. Wishing to be somewhere else, I started pushing a pebble around in the road with my toe. "And what about you?" said Anytus, interrupting my thoughts. "What do you hate about Socrates?" I don't hate Socrates! He just enjoys ruffling people's feathers. But I couldn't say that. "I hate Socrates because he spreads his iniquity to children." Anytus nodded at me; the stranger looked convinced. He said, "Those are good points. I'll consider seriously what you have said." As he walked off, Anytus turns to me and says, "See! This is excellent. Our cause is true, our hearts are bold. We cannot lose." And with a wink he was striding purposefully towards the courts. He's a charmer, for sure. He never could charm Socrates, though. Always got turned around in the discussions with Socrates, never could really say what he wanted to say. That lack of control frustrated him, I think. I don't really know, though."

7. The Jail Cell: Imagine yourself alone in the jail cell as Socrates. What are your physical surroundings? Again, what are your senses noticing? What thoughts are going through your mind? How are you feeling as you confront your imminent death? Do you have any regrets or are you proud and confident that you did the right thing?

8. Liberation: Where have you felt or experienced liberation first hand? How does this differ from someone (parents, teachers, civil authorities) granting you a right? What would liberation feel like to you now? If you could do something liberating, what would that be? How is this any different from simply being relieved of stress?

"If I could do something liberating it would be to join a monastery."

"My first major liberating experience in my life is my senior trip to Europe. Leaving my parents at the airport was the first step, and it was intimidating - even though there were chaperones going with me - I had never been more than two states away from my parents for longer than a week. However, I did not feel completely liberated until the second day of the trip; the tour guide gave us free time to go out on our own for the rest of the evening. During this time, I went with my two best friends and explored London on our own. Everything about this afternoon was liberating, we had no directions, no chaperones, and no phones."

9. The Death Bed: Imagine yourself at the death bed of Socrates as a friend. Are you sad or angry? Who is in the room? How do they feel? Who is not in the room? Why not? What words are you hearing? What emotions do you feel? As a follower of a condemned man are you frightened? What will you do after he has died?

10. **The Liberal Arts:** How do your studies affect your life? How has an idea ever changed your life? Write about a specific book, or piece of music, or work of art that has changed the way you look at the world and yourself.