

The unexamined life is not worth living

The Trial of Socrates



On Friday 7th December 2018, Dr Mark Taylor and 15 pupils from East London Science School came to visit Winchester for 2 seminars on the trial of Socrates in Plato's *Apology*. This was a text that the pupils had been reading over the term with Mark on his Great Books programme in the school. The seminars were led by our students who went through key sections of the text to open up discussion about some of its most intriguing, challenging and abiding ideas:

- What is an examined life? Is the unexamined life really not worth living?
- What did Socrates mean when he said 'I know nothing'?
- What is meant by justice?
- Is Socrates a good teacher?
- How is knowing nothing nearer to the truth?
- What does mean for Socrates to not fear death?
- Do we care more for wealth and reputation than the state of our souls?
- Is questioning dangerous? Why did the men of Athens feel so threatened?

'That man Socrates is a pestilential fellow who corrupts the young'

'I do not think I know what I do not know'

'I live in great poverty because of my service to the god'

'to fear death, gentleman, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know'

'I shall not cease to practice philosophy, to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to anyone of you whom I happen to meet: good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, whilst you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul' (29d-e)

'wealth does not bring about excellence'

'the unexamined life is not worth living'

The pupils were incredibly thoughtful in their responses. Because of its familiarity they were willing to engage confidently and carefully with the difficulties of the text and the sorts of thinking such discussion warrants.

This was followed by an exercise which saw a variety of statements about or made by Socrates and his accusers put into a pile on the floor. One by one pupils and students read out a statement whilst the rest of us stood behind it, against it or somewhere in the middle. This was an energetic and fast moving exercise which created the hustle and bustle of a group of people making judgements, on their own or with others, about this man and his ideas. We were asked to be aware of ourselves, the gestures accompanying our choices, the language of our reasoning and the relation of collective and individual judgements to, and over, another human being.

Dante's Inferno in *The Divine Comedy*

In the afternoon it was the pupils turn to present a short piece that they have written on either Socrates or Dante's inferno which they were also reading at school, followed by questions.

- Why are Plato and Socrates in Limbo? What is limbo?
- What is the inferno for Dante?
- What's different about the poem to Socrates and his examined life? What is the idea and nature of justice in the Divine Comedy?



*'The truth is, I was on the outer edge
Of the valley of the sorrowful abyss
Which echoes with infinite lamentations*

...

*They have committed no sin, and if they have merits,
That is not enough, because they are not baptised,
Which all must be, to enter the faith which is yours.*

...

*And, when I raised my eyes a little higher,
I saw the master of knowledge, Aristotle,
Sitting there with a company of philosophers.*

*All looked to him, and they all did him honour:
I saw there Socrates, as well as Plato,
The two who stood out and were nearest to him' (Canto IV)*

'The inferno is actual and contemporary, something we can see by looking into one's self, or into the pages of tomorrow's newspapers' ¹

The Divine Comedy is 'the drama of the souls choice'



¹ Sayers, D.L. (1954) *Introductory Papers on Dante*, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, p106