

“The Strategia: A (Newly Recovered Socratic Dialogue”

Prolegomenon (Preface)

The Strategia, or the business of the general (Strategos), is not a typical academic paper. Rather, it is a philosophical exploration of issues related to the ethics of war within a democratic society written in the style of a Platonic/Socratic dialogue. As such, it is intended not so much as an exercise in rigorous philosophical argumentation within a specific system with the intent of providing generally valid answers; rather, it is an exploration of important ethical concepts within a military context by persons of good will and varied experiences. As with all Socratic dialogues, the various interlocutors engage in a discussion in which the requirements are the use of logic, a genuine search for truth, and an attitude of good-will, as opposed to a legalistic mentality which seeks to make and “win” support for a certain position through technicalities—what Socrates would have called sophistry.

The idea in this particular Socratic dialogue is to identify what constitutes ethical behavior in a military context which is also democratic using the light of reason. It is understood, although not expressed, that the search is being guided by the idea of what is the true, the good, and the beautiful. Each of the interlocutors has a specific personality and represents a particular point of view. Strategos is an old Athenian statesman who has previously served as a general—hence his name. His nephew, Timios (honest/decent) is a young man eager to act honorably in life both as a citizen and as a soldier. Praktikos, Timios’ younger brother, is also willing to learn how to act properly in his roles of citizen and soldier. But, as his name indicates, he has a more practical bent. Socrates, is of course, Socrates; a philosopher, that is to say, a lover of wisdom. A certain familiarity with Athenian democracy is expected of the reader. Parallels or analogies to a modern American context are indeed possible but, as with all analogies, prudence is advised.

The Strategia: A (Newly Recovered) Socratic Dialogue

by Dr. Prisco Hernandez

(Dramatis Personae: **Timios**—a young man; **Praktikos**—Timios' younger brother; **Strategos**—a distinguished citizen and former general; **Socrates**—a lover of wisdom)

Strategos, a distinguished Athenian citizen and former general has invited Socrates to dine with him. Also present are two of Strategos' young nephews—Timios and Praktikos—who have been discussing among them what qualities they should cultivate in order to become worthy Athenian citizens. After a simple meal of bread, olives, cheese, and grilled fish, Strategos orders his servant to bring the best honeyed wine for his guests and a *symposium* or after-dinner conversation ensues.

Timios: Friends, as you well know, I have no greater desire than to be a good citizen of my polis in all things. Thus, when called to serve as a soldier I want to be a good one; not only as a fighter, but more so by acting in a morally upright way. Since a man must know what is virtue in order to practice virtue I wonder if you could help me find my way.

Strategos: Well spoken young fellow! Your zeal for soldierly virtue is commendable and should serve as an example to the youth of our polis! From experience I will tell you that you would do no wrong in your quest if you propose to follow the military virtues and obey the orders of the superior officers appointed to be your leaders.

Timios: Uncle, your counsel appears to be wise and a sure road to soldierly virtue.

Praktikos: But tell me then, dear uncle, what *are* the military virtues?

Strategos: Have you not been instructed in these at the gymnasium Praktikos? Timios, perhaps you could refresh your brother's memory?

Timios: I remember our gymnasium master teaching us that in order to be a true citizen and a good soldier a man must cultivate what he called the crucial or *cardinal virtues* of *courage*, *prudence*, *justice*, and *temperance*. He also said that loyalty to their polis and to their fellow soldiers is the glue that binds a loose aggregation of men into an army. If each member of the army practices these virtues and steels his body for the rigors of war and of campaigning, whether it be in the heat or the cold, in the dust or the rain, he will become a good soldier and a true servant of his polis.

Strategos: Well put my boy! I could not have said it better! But you must always remember that even if courage, prudence, justice, and temperance are what make the virtuous man, *loyalty* and

obedience are what makes a group of men an army. It follows, that all of these together, must be considered the military virtues.

Socrates: Strategos, your counsel is mostly sound. I can see that you speak from experience; as someone who has been tested and proven worthy. I too, have fought for our polis as a common soldier and have verified in my own bones the truth of what you have said. I have, however, a point of concern.

Strategos: What would this be, my wise friend?

Socrates: Don't call me wise, my good friend, I merely seek after wisdom. Know that, the moment you think you are wise, you no longer move toward your goal, thus falling short. But, to answer your question: You have mentioned the importance of loyalty and obedience and have placed them with the cardinal virtues. In general terms, this seems fair. But, surely there must be exceptions to this rule; do you not agree?

Strategos: This is dangerous ground Socrates. For surely you know by your own experience that, in the chaos of combat there is no room for hesitation; orders must be followed immediately and exactly no matter what may follow. I'm sure you would agree that it is better for the army to do something, even if it turns out to be not the best course of action, than for each soldier to decide what to do on his own? Surely the latter would produce the worst disaster!

Praktikos: I can see the wisdom of acting in concert even if the action ordered is not the best. At least there is protection in numbers and strength in unity of action!

Socrates: I grant you, that in practical matters of tactics both you, worthy Strategos, and you, eager young man, may be in the right. However, I was thinking about matters of greater import; about matters of the soul. I'm thinking of acting virtuously.

Timios: Master Socrates, please explain what is it that troubles you.

Socrates: Loyalty and obedience are surely good things provided that the *object* of this loyalty is worthy of it and that obedience responds to a *virtuous* command. This is why these attitudes of the will are not absolute virtues; they depend on the specific context.

Praktikos: I am confused Master Socrates. Could you help me understand your point?

Socrates: Dear Praktikos, suppose that your general orders you to kill all the enemy prisoners in cold blood. You ask for the reason why this should be done and he answers that, first of all, your duty is not to reason the whys or wherefores but to execute orders punctually and completely out

of loyalty to him as the representative of your polis and for the benefit of your fellow citizens. Would this explanation satisfy your moral sense?

Praktikos: In spite of my youth and inexperience, and even though I mean no disrespect to my elders and my general, I believe that I would be deeply troubled if I were to execute this order.

Socrates: What aspects of the command would trouble you my dear boy?

Praktikos: That I believe that killing is justified only when defending the polis and my fellow citizens. Once the enemy soldiers surrender, they present no menace to us. It follows, that we act unjustly and even cruelly if we kill unarmed enemy prisoners.

Socrates: But you have been issued an order Praktikos! And, as a soldier, it is your duty to *obey* orders. What is more, Praktikos, the order has been issued by your rightful general and in the name of *loyalty* to your fellow citizens and your polis.

Praktikos: But Socrates, acting in this way would be contrary to *temperance* and *justice*. Furthermore, such an act requires no *courage*; more so, it would be a mockery of courage, since the enemy are unarmed. Finally it would show an alarming lack of *prudence* for the cruel precedent such an action would set for future. Even putting aside questions of morality, self-interest itself would indicate that such actions only invite retaliation by a vengeful enemy! But even more troubling is that it would run contrary to the cardinal virtues!

Socrates: Praktikos, you have clearly distinguished true *virtues*—which may be described as permanent orientations of character—from *attitudes of the will* whose virtue depends on the circumstances! You have spoken well!

Praktikos—I am not pleased Master Socrates, for you are a hard taskmaster. My own reasoning has put me in a dilemma. Now I clearly see *that loyalty and obedience could be virtues; but only when directed to a moral purpose*. Unfortunately, they could also serve as avenues for evil in the hands of immoral or ignorant people. I suppose it is as you said: Whether loyalty and obedience are virtuous depends on the context.



Timios: Master Socrates, this is confusing to me. I had dutifully memorized the six military virtues so that I would be able to apply them to my daily acts with ease. But you say that the last two may or may not be virtues at all and that it depends on the context. Who then judges the context?

Socrates: Dear Timios, it was your *brother* that made the distinction! However, you pose an important question. But first tell me this Timios: Who judges the mind of an Athenian citizen?

Timios: Master Socrates, we Athenians are a proud people. We pride ourselves on our liberty. And there is no greater liberty than thinking your own thoughts! No one citizen should tell another citizen what to think! That would be tantamount to tyranny!

Praktikos: Well said brother!

Strategos: Well said indeed nephew! You are now well on your way to becoming a true Athenian!

Socrates: Very well, friends. Since we are all in agreement that each citizen must be free to think for his own, let us apply our minds to the examination of virtue, military virtue if you will; or more correctly, to the examination of virtue *in a military context*.

Strategos: Socrates, this is a worthy cause indeed, if there ever was one! For I know from experience how war puts man's capacity for virtue to the harshest of tests!

Timios and Praktikos: Worthy cause indeed!

Socrates: Very well, my friends; so tell me, how should we proceed?

Praktikos: Master Socrates, when examining anything at all I like to begin at the very beginning. So it stands to reason that if we want to examine virtue in war we should begin with the question of *why* wars are fought at all.

Socrates: Praktikos, your reasoning is admirable! Friends let us now turn to the question of why states go to war and whether these reasons are valid.

Strategos: Self-defense is an obvious reason Socrates. Think of what happened when the Persians invaded Greece. Not only did we, the Athenians, were compelled to take up the hard duties of the soldier, but also the Spartans, the Corinthians and many others did as well.

Socrates: But why did we resort to war? Why did we not try to use reason and diplomacy to get out of a bad situation? After all, reason is universal to all men and truth is irrefutable.

Strategos: Socrates, don't be difficult! You know that no one could expect to reason with the Persian King of Kings and expect to keep his liberties! When men are blinded by ambition and pride reason is no longer their guide. Passion and self-interest close our eyes to truth!

Socrates: I grant you that much Strategos. History has shown that there are times where men must fight if they wish to remain free. I know it in my bones! But, what do you make of the wars between our polis and the Spartans? Were those wars of necessity?

Strategos: Socrates, now you take us into difficult territory. I remember what Thucydides said many times.

Socrates: Remind us of what he said, my friend.

Strategos: That wars, and I paraphrase, are caused by three things: fear, honor, and self-interest. Clearly *all men fear foreign conquest* and the preservation of one's liberties was at stake when the Persians invaded us; and, according to my grandfathers, fear of Spartan power was also a cause of the first war with the Spartans.

Socrates: Be aware though, Strategos, that war is a grave matter, my friend. And reasonable men should not act from irrational fears.

Strategos: Agreed Socrates. But then again, some fears may be justified.

Socrates: In that case, my friend, war may be a reasonable cause for action. But in all cases reason must be consulted in order to determine whether or not the facts would allow us to decide to start a war. This is because war does not involve single individuals; they affect all citizens, nay entire societies. When Troy fell, not only did Hector, Priam, and his family fall; the entire city came to grief through fire and sword.

Strategos: Socrates, you have spoken well. Would that our fellow citizens heed your counsel in the assembly of the people; would that our elected leaders be dutiful students of reason!

Socrates: Remember too, Strategos, that war involves killing. Think. What treasure does man possess that is worth more to him than his own life?

Strategos: Clearly none Socrates, for even virtue is impossible without life.

Socrates: How, then, would you value honor?

Strategos: I take this back Socrates. I can see how honor could be deemed more worthy than life itself. For all men must die. But the man who purchases just a little more time upon this miserable earth at the expense of his honor must be deemed a sorry fellow indeed. Similarly, the polis who avoids war by becoming someone else's slave is unworthy of herself!

Socrates: You speak nobly, my dear friend! But tell me, could *self-interest* ever be a moral cause of war?

Strategos: This is more difficult to answer Socrates. Clearly every man, just as every polis, desires what is good or beneficial to him. This, in my view, is not a moral evil because, for example, we Athenians want to preserve our freedoms as citizens and the freedom to trade where we will. The preservation of these freedoms is essential to our ethos and to our prosperity. Thus, self-interest should not be condemned outright.

Socrates: Does it mean then that we should praise self-interest as a worthy motion of the will?

Strategos: Oh Socrates, I am too old to fall into your trap! Neither at *all* times nor in *all* circumstances should we be so rash as to praise self-interest without qualification. It seems to me that *not only self-interest, but possibly honor, if not rooted in moral worth, fall into the same category as obedience and loyalty.* The desire for these things could be either a good or bad attitude of the will depending on circumstance.

Socrates: Strategos, old friend, I agree with you! The problem is to determine whether going to a *specific war* out of a desire to gain or preserve honor, to further self-interest, or even out of a sense of fear is morally justifiable both for the polis and for the individual citizens who will serve as soldiers.

Strategos: Socrates, these matters must be resolved by men who are willing to use reason in order to seek wisdom in the service of the good. It follows that in a democracy, each citizen must strive to act according to what may be termed well-ordered reason and do so in the service of their fellow citizens and never out of rashness, self-interest, or misguided ambition. In other words, true citizens must have virtue and reason as their guides. More so if elected to public office.

Socrates: Well spoken my friend. I do believe that your life has illustrated these principles very well.

Strategos: Your praise, oh Socrates, is worth to me more that you will ever know!

Praktikos: Gentlemen, your thoughts are deeper than the wine-dark sea! I marvel at your wisdom. I feel my thoughts swirling within my head like the waves of Okeanos when touched by Poseidon's trident...

Strategos: Praktikos, I suggest that you mix a little more water into your wine and pay close attention. These are grave matters indeed; and one day you will thank my shade for inviting Socrates to dine with us!

Timios: Brother grow up! With uncle and Master Socrates we are learning what it takes to *think*, to *act*, indeed to *be* Athenian men!



Socrates: Be at peace young men! It is indeed enjoyable for me to entertain your inquiry into grave matters. You show great zeal in your desire for knowledge and what is more—for wisdom. Would that more of our youth did the same! But, to examine problems rationally, one must remain inwardly calm in order to weigh each thing or each argument according to its worth. Let us now add some more honey...

Strategos: And *water* Praktikos!

Socrates: ...into our wine, recollect ourselves, and continue our examination of the problems posed by war.

Strategos: Oh Socrates! Your patience is indeed proverbial. Your love for truth is surpassed only by your love for your friends! Come now boys, what are your concerns?

Timios: Let me be very honest with you, uncle, what troubles me most about war is the killing. In the gymnasium we settle our differences by competing in all manner of sports. We race each other, both on foot and on horseback, we see who can throw the javelin, the discus, or the ball the farthest; we wrestle and we box with our fists. But even in fighting, we do not go as far as to kill our opponent. Yes, from time to time we may bash his head or punch him senseless (if we don't like him); but he certainly lives to fight another day. He may even become our friend. But not in war. In war we kill the enemy; and that is forever. Why then, do we have to do this?

Strategos: On such difficult matters, good Timios, I defer to my friend Socrates.

Socrates: Timios, you have posed a difficult question. If we agree that killing another man is a grave matter; it stands to reason that fighting a war in which many men are killed is indeed an even graver matter. Do you agree on this point?

Timios: I do Socrates.

Socrates: If this is the case, young man, then a state should only go to war for serious reasons, indeed reasons of life or death; and then only if war cannot be avoided through some alternative course of action.

Strategos: What you say is very reasonable Socrates.

Socrates: We saw, for example, how Athens had to fight the Persians to preserve her freedom. Later we fought Sparta out of fear, honor, and perhaps a good dose of dubious self-interest. In all of these wars, Athenians responded to the call to arms. And, particularly in the case of the Persian invasions, I do believe that the reasons were morally just and would not cause our men and our polis to sin against justice, temperance, and prudence. Certainly, we Athenians behaved individually and as a group with great courage.

Timios—Master Socrates, in this case I believe that obedience and loyalty would be proper attitudes of the will because they were placed at the service of the virtues.

Socrates—You reason well young man!

Strategos: Socrates, both you and I were not heedless of the call of our polis!

Socrates: This is true my friend. And both of us tried to heed the voice of conscience so that our acts would be virtuous at all times.

Timios: Even the killing?

Socrates: *Especially* the killing!

Timios: How can this be Master Socrates?

Socrates: When the motives for war are just, it follows that the actions done in war, provided that they are tempered with prudence, must be done in the service of justice and not from any other base motive. Thus actions carried out because of the consequence of a choice rooted in justice and in the service of a moral purpose must of necessity be just.

Praktikos: It follows Master Socrates that it is very important to determine whether a war is fought for a moral purpose. Only then could a soldier act justly when in the service of a just cause.

Socrates: It appears to be so Praktikos.

Praktikos: And, Master Socrates, to whom should I look up for this important decision.

Socrates: How is our polis constituted Praktikos?

Praktikos: We have an elected assembly of mature Athenian citizens who decide in all cases what should be done for the benefit of our state.

Socrates: Very well Praktikos. And are their decisions always just?

Praktikos: I would think so. Our citizens deliberate with great care. Is this true uncle?

Strategos: This is indeed the ideal, my dear nephew. However, it has been my experience that even the best intentioned, most civic-minded among us, at times fail to recognize, propose, and follow what appears to me as the clear moral path. After all, it is well known that “to err is human.”

Timeos: Uncle, I have heard it said that to err is human. But to err in matters of war and peace seems to me very dangerous and frightening.

Socrates: Do you remember what you said about freedom my dear Timeos?

Timeos: I do Master Socrates.

Socrates: Could you repeat it for our benefit?

Timeos: I shall try. I believe that I said that we Athenians are a proud people and that no Athenian could presume to tell another Athenian what to think. Freedom of thought is our most cherished freedom!

Socrates: Very well my lad. And so it is perfectly possible to conceive of a situation in which even though our polis could vote for war or peace based on the views of the majority, this would not mean that the minority would be necessarily convinced of the truth or of the morality of their decision. Could this be possible?

Timeos: Knowing what I know about human nature even in my young age, I believe this is so, Master Socrates.

Praktikos: In this, I agree with my brother!

Strategos: My friend, I see the path you are taking, and it is fraught with dangers. For any one citizen to diverge from the majority opinion on such a great matter as war is both suspect and dangerous. On the one hand, it is more difficult to deceive one person than many people, as is the case with our assembly; on the other hand, a lone voice who has no other help than his own conscience and the persuasiveness of his own arguments is in danger of being called a traitor; or what is worse of being wrong. However, despite all this, I cannot deny, oh Socrates, that I have seen such situations develop, perhaps more often than I would like to admit, in our own polis. These are grave matters indeed, my friend.

Socrates: Good Strategos, you are correct on both counts, my friend. A man who seeks to be wise must first take a good look around him. He must mark and recognize everything that he sees and deny nothing; least of all those things that may be inconvenient to his own self-interest. Only then can he hope to be guided by the virtues in the light of reason. With this in mind, let us try to get to the bottom of the truth in these matters.

Strategos: Socrates, before we proceed I see that I have gotten to the bottom of my cup. Servant, bring more wine for my guests!



Socrates: Oh Strategos, your hospitality is admirable. I do believe that wine, in moderation, helps man think because it produces a certain warmth throughout the body which rekindles the humors in the brain helping the flow of our thoughts.

Strategos: Oh Socrates, you never cease to amaze me! But, where were we in our discussion?

Socrates: Strategos, you were perplexed because when looking honestly at the workings of our civic institutions, particularly those engaged in decisions on war and peace, you noticed that there is indeed a gap between the ideal and the real. You noticed that, even though such grave matters such as the question of whether or not to go to war are often discussed, oftentimes, decisions are taken based on arguments that satisfy neither reason nor virtue. This is so evident that even your two nephews agreed with this observation, in spite of their inexperience and young age. You also remarked that because of all of this, an Athenian citizen who sincerely wants to act virtuously and according to right reason may indeed come to different conclusions than those in power, particularly if they have been swayed by sophists and demagogues and if they are in thrall to self-interest or misplaced ambition. Furthermore, my good friend, you observed that this way of thinking is, as you said, “fraught with dangers,” not only because the citizen who dissents from the majority may be accused of treason (from which grave

consequences would follow) but also, because despite all, he may be proved wrong. Is this then a fair assessment of your thoughts dear friend?

Strategos: It is, Socrates. Furthermore, we are all agreed that any true Athenian man is only worthy of the name if is able and willing think for himself. Without this attitude of the will and this capacity of the mind, he would not be an Athenian man. It follows that opting out of any decision that pertains to the polis is not an option for him; thus the danger Socrates. I must add that, depending on the political climate, the danger could be to his very life, or to the well-being of his family. But, as we all know even more pitiful would be to risk all this for nothing, because man is fallible—as was pointed out before: “to err is human.”

Socrates: Strategos, you have described the problem well. Framed in your terms the problem of deciding on the virtue of a specific war is inescapable to any Athenian man; it follows from our condition as free men. We cannot imitate the ostrich when danger approaches and bury our heads in the sand. We must rather stand up to fate. As Homer tells us, both Achilles and Hector knew that they were fated to die in combat; both of them knew that, as true men, they had to live up to their fate by being true to themselves. I say to you, my friends, it is not easy to be a true man and a true Athenian. Freedom is a precious gift. But it is not gratuitous. It carries with it a heavy responsibility. To be free is to be aware of your situation, to look at your circumstances, and to take responsibility for your actions. To be virtuous, your actions must accord with the Good. The virtuous man is brother to the immortal gods.

Praktikos: How then, Master Socrates, should a young man proceed?

Socrates: Each man must find his own way. But I believe that you already know in which direction you are to proceed. You have already described the virtues that should help you find and maintain your way. Could you review them for us, dear Praktikos?

Praktikos: Master, a man could not go too far astray if he follows the path of Justice, Courage, Prudence, and Temperance, while being aware of the circumstances in his life and letting virtue and reason guide him. Further, a man who strives for virtue must know that some attitudes of mind, such as obedience, loyalty, patriotism, self-interest, and even honor, can either serve the cause of virtue or pose stumbling blocks to the seeker of virtue by passing as virtues that apply in any and all circumstances—which they certainly are not!

Socrates: Your words show wisdom beyond your years, dear Praktikos. Do you have anything to add to your brother’s statement, dear Timios?

Timios: Socrates, I must recognize honor where honor is due, my younger brother spoke well. I would only add that now I recognize that I may have been too zealous and too simple when I

tried to memorize a list of attributes (which I then confused with virtues) that I thought would allow me to act in a virtuous way *if only I remembered and applied them*, mechanically, as it were, to the various circumstances of my life. This would be akin to a sculptor who would treat each block of marble the same, without taking into account the possibilities inherent in its essence, without first examining its form, its texture for clues of how best it could be fashioned into the form most suited to it thus fashioning a likeness of Achilles from marble which in its soft radiance and lustrous texture would be more appropriate to a delicate nymph, or vice versa. I now know that this is a childish way to enter the path of virtue; not fit for a man, much less an *Athenian* man.

Socrates: Nothing gladdens the heart of an old man as witnessing the flowering of youth into true manhood before him! Young friends, the search for virtue and truth is a difficult road, fraught with danger and frustration; but I do believe that going about life unthinking and in the dark is, despite its apparent ease, ultimately a path for frustration and decay—unworthy of a free man.

Timios and Praktikos: You have words of true wisdom, Master Socrates!

Socrates: If Wisdom chooses to speak through my voice, I am at once gladdened and humbled. But let me remind you that, the moment that you think you are wise, you begin to fall out from the path of Wisdom and the Good. Wisdom requires humility and constant openness of the soul to the Good.

Strategos: Socrates, my old and true friend! What delight have your presence and your conversation brought to my table! I thank the immortal Gods; or better, that unity which you call the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, for your friendship! You have brought wisdom, delight, and blessing to my house and to the next generation of Athenian men! Thank you, dear friend. Thank you, Socrates.

Socrates: Dear friends, let us retire for the night, each to his bed, and, watching the fixed stars, meditate on the good that has come from our symposium. May sweet sleep grant relief to our bodies, rest to our minds, and peace to our souls.

