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PHILOSOPHY ORIGINATES FROM THE SEA



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Hedistē We are approaching the islands. In a few hours we will see the bonfires on the shore, and we will enter the Gulf of Corinth.

Socrates That is what you tell me, but I doubt your statement. For two days and two nights we have seen nothing but sea, waves and clouds.

Hedistē The course is correct. The sky is clear. At night we keep Cynosoura, the Dog's Tail, firmly to the left, across the ship. During the day we let the sun guide us at dawn at the bow, and accompany us until evening, gliding gently on the starboard side, leaving us at the stern at sunset. Homer already narrated this route.

*Thus, with the rudder, he skilfully steered the course,
sitting: sleep never fell upon his eyes,
his eyes fixed on the Pleiades, fixed on Boötes, which sets late,
and the Bear, also called the Wagon,
and always turns and looks fearfully at Orion,
and alone she has no part in the baths of Ocean;
for Calypso, the shining goddess, had ordered him
to keep to the left when crossing the sea.
For seventeen days he sailed across the abyss,
on the eighteenth day the shady mountains
of the land of the Phaeacians: it was already very close,
it looked like a shield there in the misty sea.¹*

Syracuse is west of Corinth, Corinth east of Syracuse. The sea is

always dangerous, but today the route is clear, and it will not take us seventeen days.

Socrates The weather is favourable, Hedistē, and we will not keep company with the fish if your hand continues to hold the helm firmly and if the wind blows favourably. The sea that brings us back to our lands has given us time to talk and meditate at our leisure, and our friends in Corinth will not be too upset if we have drunk a glass of this fine nectar from Trinacria intended for them. Since we still have a little time, pilot, we can perhaps retrace the many lessons of this voyage. Moreover, I am very grateful to you for opening my eyes to many things, and in the letter I will write to Eulalia, the owner of the ship who so kindly offered me a passage, I will not fail to praise you.

Hedistē You speak of lessons, Socrates, but how is it possible that a teacher such as yourself could find yourself in the shoes of a school-boy today?

Socrates The skill you have mastered, pilot, requires an even longer journey than the one that takes us from Trinacria to our homeland. But that is not what I want to talk to you about now: I would not become a pilot of ships even if I applied myself to it for the rest of my days, and as much as I admire your skill in steering the ship through the waves, in adjusting the sails, in saying the right words to the sailors, I am even more impressed by the words you spoke about our imperfect knowledge of the world and the sea.

Hedistē Then speak to me, Socrates, and I will listen quietly, also because the wind is picking up a little and the helm requires a delicate but sure hand.

Socrates Do not be distracted. Think of when we left Syracuse and began to see the great cone of the volcano receding astern.

Hedistē Our surest guide, and the sight coveted by those heading for Syracuse. What cries of joy the sailors utter when they first see the cloud cap of the volcano. From that moment on, the course is set,

cheerfulness takes hold, and everyone begins to think of the loved ones they will meet in a few hours.

Socrates As we moved away from Syracuse, the volcano gradually shrank until it was no longer visible, but you noticed that it disappeared below the horizon. In the same way, before it, the beaches and houses and cliffs had disappeared, and then the hills with the vineyards. Now, if we were in an open field, distant things would shrink, but they would still be visible in their entirety, from head to toe. If things not only shrink but are amputated first at the feet, then the legs, and finally the torso and head, this can only mean that the earth curves beyond the horizon. Some will find this surprising.

Hedistē Surprising to you who do not live at sea. For generations, sailors have known that the earth curves beyond the horizon, and while some fear that if they go too far, the curvature will cause them to slip into the great abyss of nothingness, others, many others, know that the earth is one big curve that closes in on itself, a ball, a great sphere.

Socrates And how do they know this?

Hedistē Fortunately, our sea is a sea of islands. For generations, we have been travelling from one island to another, always following the same routes. Each time, we invariably notice the same thing: the next island gradually emerges from the horizon that opens up from the previous one, and the island from which we departed disappears below the horizon. If this curvature were, as some say, a prelude to a descent into nothingness, the boats that sail away from the outermost of these islands would have already slipped away.

Socrates That is what you tell me, and that is enough for me. The earth is curved. But speaking of roundness and curves, the star of sailors is always in the same place, and on a long night like this we have seen a piece of the sky revolve around it. Cassiopeia takes the place of the Bear, and vice versa. The stars parade from east to west; each has a name, but they are all the same.

Hedistē Those who go to sea watch, fear, and talk constantly about the stars. Their movement confuses us, but to keep the boat in the waves, few things help as much as a star straight ahead on the bow. That is how I learned to steer from my father, and that is how I will teach my daughter. He would point to a star near the horizon and say, try not to stray from the bow. I would ask him, 'Which star?', and he would reply, 'The red one over there, the tip of that shape that looks like a pouring wineskin'. Every sailor creates figures in the sky according to his imagination, the important thing is that these figures are clear to those who are learning. When we talk among ourselves, we agree on certain figures. The night is long, and we exchange many words.

Socrates I would like to think that the names of the stars come from conversations between pilots and crew.

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Socrates Yesterday morning at sunrise, I thought the land was near; a long cliff stood before us on the horizon.

Hedistē As I told you, they were just banks of fog.

Socrates We discussed it at length. So great was my desire to land that I felt compelled to demand an explanation from you. What a disappointment when I had to admit you were right: the vapours cleared as soon as Phoebus' chariot rose high in the sky, and only the sea remained.

Hedistē How many discussions, how many arguments on board, on this very subject. The inexperienced, eager to go ashore, try to convince the others, whose experience struggles to find the right words to refute specious arguments. As it was with you: I showed you the uncertain colour and blurred edges of that line, I reminded you that we had set sail too recently to have already reached the coast, I pointed out that the mirage did not seem to be getting any closer even

though we had been sailing in its direction for some time, and finally I had to appeal to my small but secure authority to put an end to your recriminations.

Socrates I bowed to the evidence, but I should have taken your authority into account. There is opinion and there is knowledge, and opinion can be a mere illusion. We should always bear this distinction in mind.

Hedistē Think about this then. The night is still long. We seafarers always wonder if it will end at some point, if the day will return to light our way. And when someone claims with certainty that they know, we always ask them how they know. It's an old game. We all know that since the beginning of time, day and night have alternated, that the sun goes away from here to return there. Yet the nights are endless, frightening even the most daring among us, and filled with many words.

Socrates You wanted to teach me to recognise and name that star we see rising just before dawn during the warm season.

Hedistē It is Sirius. I taught you this so that you could find it like a friend at the end of long nights on board.

Socrates I admire your expertise, but I wonder, my friend, how can we be sure that it is the same star? The stars all look alike. Bright points in the sky, gods and goddesses, but all equal to each other.

Hedistē It is from the relationship that each of them has with the others that we know what each of them is. We learn the figures in the sky precisely because they help us remember the names of the stars that make up their corners. Orion has a belt, legs and arms: learn its shape and you cannot go wrong. The stars all look alike; the subtle differences in colour and size are only clear to an expert eye. Constellations, on the other hand, are unique characters, each with its own personality.

Socrates You have suggested a solution to me. We recognise stars, which are apparently indistinguishable from one another, by virtue of their relationship to other stars. An isolated star is not easily identified. If we recognise it by its absolute position, without relation to other stars, we cannot say that we are using the stars to find the position...

Hedistē ... because that would be circular reasoning.

Socrates And Venus? The wanderer that we sometimes see as the evening star, sometimes as the morning star?

Hedistē Time must pass, weeks and months, before Venus, which disappears in the evening, reappears in the morning on the opposite side of the sun. Venus is Hesperus, the evening star, for many months; it becomes Phosphorus, the morning star, for many others, and vice versa. We give it different names, but we know that they are names for the same thing. It is like when you call Hermione by her name and also by a nickname.

Socrates And the sun itself? How certain are we that it will rise, and that it will rise identical every morning?

Hedistē We discuss this too, especially with novices in our art, passengers on their first voyage. Some, frightened by the approaching night, invoke the gods to ward off the danger that our star will disappear forever after setting into the sea. Others remember that since the beginning of time, the sun has risen again after setting. And the most astute instil doubt that the sun is destroyed overnight and replaced by a different sun every day.

Socrates We realise how difficult it is sometimes to use our words to make ourselves understood even to those we know well.

Hedistē You make me talk a lot, wise Socrates, and luckily the wind has died down a little. But what about this? When we meet people from other lands in distant ports and try to communicate with them,

and they do not understand our language? There are those who think that these strangers cannot even speak, that they stammer, vainly trying to express childish thoughts. There are those who believe that their language is just as happy as ours, and those who mock both sides, arguing that it is we who stammer in the ears of these peoples.

Socrates How can we be sure that they mean the same thing when we finally seem to be able to communicate with them? Yet we must believe it, otherwise we cannot explain the trade and exchanges we have managed to maintain with so many peoples. They call “Aktiki” what we call “Athens”; do we trust their helmsman who shows us the way back? Perhaps we do so because we have a mutual acquaintance. Perhaps he seems trustworthy to us because he accurately describes the details of a coastline that we also know well.

Socrates Sailing allows us to overcome distances, to look beyond the borders of our city. The further we go, the more we feel we are on the threshold of lands yet to be discovered. But from one port to another, we feel a brotherhood. It is as if the pier from which we set sail and the one where we dock are only a step apart – the step we take to get on and off the boat.

Hedistē If you are looking for new and strange things, stay where you are; you don't need to go far. The sea around you is populated by monsters.

Socrates I have seen them, they are strange and different creatures: large and small fish, multi-armed octopuses, diaphanous jellyfish. I have seen the luminous trail that follows us in the night. Dolphins that greet us as we pass. Whales that could lift the ship on a whim. What else is there beneath and around us?

Hedistē I do not know for sure, and by now I have learned to be wary of travellers' tales: things never seen before become bigger and more frightening in the imagination and in words. But one thing I know: what is on land is not found in the sea, and what is in the sea is not found on land. Few animals are capable of passing from one world to the other.

Socrates How can we trust a story? We have not witnessed the event, and sometimes, when we have, we are surprised by how others narrate it, each betraying their own point of view.

Hedistē Let us listen to trustworthy people: friends who would not lie to us, experienced sailors who have brought ships back to port after long voyages, elders who have experience. Sometimes our trust is misplaced, of course, but we cannot be suspicious of everyone and trust no one. We trust what others do when we see them on their ships: we watch which sails they hoist and lower, how they approach the landing place, and we do the same. We never think that they are deceiving us or putting on an act.

Socrates Their lives are at stake, as are ours. Trust is a mirror image here.

Hedistē Incidentally, I spoke with sailors who came from distant waters, beyond the Pillars of Hercules. Down there, the sea rises and falls with the moon, filling and emptying the riverbed, leaving ships aground. If you try to enter the harbour at a time when the water is not with you, even a favourable wind cannot take you where you want to go. This is the story: the water flows towards you and under the ship, the waves rush towards you, the wind carries you, you have the impression of moving: but if you look at the coast, the rock, the harbour signal, you realise that you are not advancing five fathoms.

Socrates What a strange sea you describe! The same thing happens when we try to sail against the current at the mouth of a large river. The senses deceive us, we might say. We do not know which of our perceptions to believe: the one that sees the ship moving forward, or the one that sees the ship standing still.

Hedistē We see something similar in the stretches of water in front of our cities, Piraeus and Syracuse, and pilots tell us about it in battle; they do not know whether it is their ship or the enemy's that is moving forward; they have to keep an eye on both the enemy ship and some sign on land; sometimes they are paralysed in action. And again,

in shallow waters, you will have noticed how a tremor in the surface is enough to make the base of the rock seem to be moving, and how difficult it is to decide whether the movement you see is attributable to the thing or the medium, to the octopus trying to hide or to the rippling water.

Socrates You are right, it is not just a matter of deception of the senses; it is that motion, in order to be detected, needs a point of reference, a landmark, but if only one point of reference is visible, we may never know whether it is that point that is in motion or whether it is us, or even both. And perhaps it will not even make sense to settle the question – motion in absolute terms may not exist.

Hedistē And look at those reckless swimmers who are deluded by the image of a coveted island; they see it from the beach and venture into the water. They see a ripple in the sea that appears to be close to their destination, but when they reach it, they are not even halfway across.

Socrates There are no reliable landmarks in the sea to gauge distances.

Hedistē When we go to sea, our senses are weakened anyway. The wind scatters our words, distorts them. The ship pitches and rolls. Night envelops us, during the day the sun blinds us, its reflection in the waves dazzles us. The things we want to see are very far away and indistinct – when they are close enough to observe calmly, it is already too late.

Socrates As with the roundness of the earth, we must go beyond our senses, or at least examine them in the light of other information. In all these uncertainties, dear Hedistē, your hand is steady, and this ship gives me confidence. I could not have returned on a different ship.

Hedistē (*Her silvery laughter frightens a seagull that had alighted on an oar.*) But it is a different ship.

Socrates In what way? We found it where we left it moored; its co-

lours allow us to recognise it among a thousand others; it is certainly not like the stars, which we have seen to be all similar to one another!

Hedistē True. But at the port of Syracuse we changed the rudder bar; hold it for a moment, please, as I want to take a sip of water. And at the previous landing place we replaced two worn planks of the deck. And at the one before that we changed the entire mast. In Corinth, I want to have the sails redone. Ships need constant repairs and changes. At the end of its life, some of us joke, there won't be a single nail left of the ship we launched!

Socrates So it is not just a question of what makes us *recognise* it as the same ship. We could make replacements that do not alter its appearance in any way, but they would still be replacements.

Hedistē Some think that it would still be the same ship, because it has continued to sail, or because it is steered by the same helmsman, or because it belonged and belongs to a single family, or because it has not changed shape despite the many parts that have been replaced. Others maliciously claim that even the replacement of a single block would make it a different ship.

Socrates If we had preserved one of the ships that were victorious at the Battle of Salamis, but left it to rot little by little until we could see only its skeleton, would we say it was the same ship? If we had rebuilt a ship with planks from many other shipwrecked ships, giving it a shape identical to the victorious ship, would we say it was the same ship?

Hedistē So many questions, perhaps without answers!

Socrates The same and the different, the one and the many!

Hedistē We ask ourselves this question every day. Is the island, the inlet we are approaching, the one we hoped to find after our long voyage on the open sea? Is it the coveted inlet of our return? Or is it another, similar to it in every way? Experience comes to our aid, but

doubt is always lurking.

Socrates So many questions. But the night is still long, and the wind blows gently.



Noter

1 Odysseus, VI, 270-280.